ALFRED

AUGUST 60¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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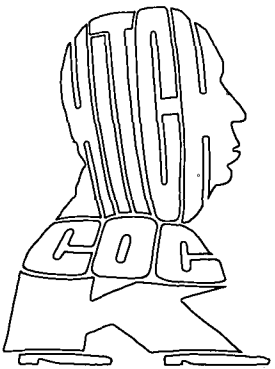

August 1970

Dear Reader:

The summer sun is a dim light bulb when compared with the heat put upon the personalities in this issue. Some of these souls are more deserving than others, but ill fates are handed down without fear or favor. Surely these new and well-plotted plights will diminish your own, as is my wish.

If thinking processes slow in this season, there is no sign of it within, particularly in this month's novelette. Therein the human mind begins to realize its full potential. Intelligence also comes to the fore in matters of job advancement, the *newer* math, classified prevarication and, for well-rounded midsummer learning, the fine arts.

Yet, whatever else may be involved, the mayhem is ever-present.

It matters not at which point you enter this domain. Each beginning is devised by professionals to ensnare you hopelessly and hold you to the end. May your final exit be reluctant.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 15, NO. 8 AUGUST 1970

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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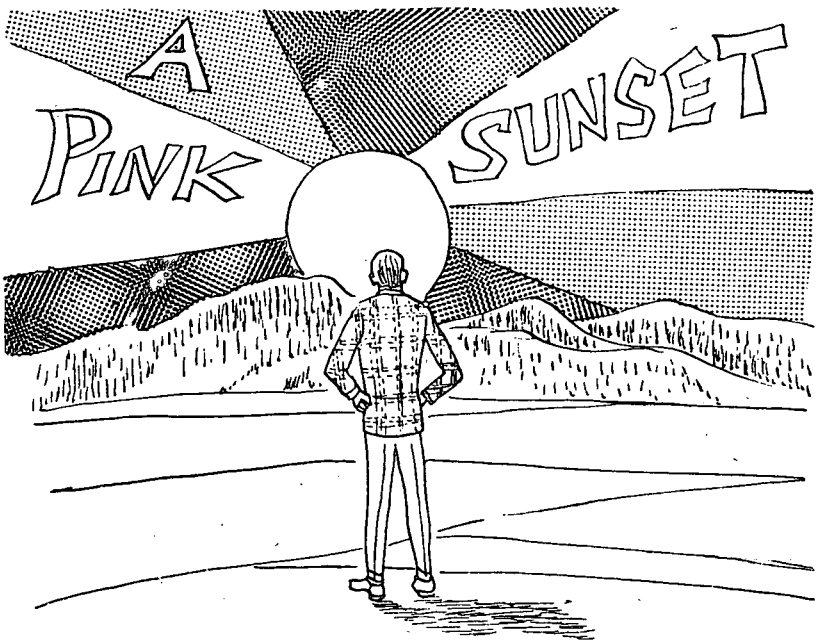
Lady Luck seldom begrudges a helping hand, but even that hand may need a bit of reciprocation.



DENNY MULHANE stood morosely behind the front desk of the large Reno hotel, contemplating luck. Luck, he had long believed, was the final decider of a man's destiny. He also believed, of course, that a man was required to be conscientious, hard-working, dedicated, eager, and scrupulous beyond a fault. Still, a man was caught in the current-sweep of life, as he liked to phrase it. There was so very little he could do about that beyond keeping himself afloat, because it was luck, finally, that brought a man to his level of worth, accomplishment and reward.

And *this* was his level of worth? His accomplishment? His reward?

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Denny sighed and turned his lean figure, suited conservatively in dark blue. He rolled up a check-in slip of a recently arrived guest and stuffed it into a tube. As he sent it on its pneumatic way to the switchboard upstairs where it would go into the rack, a tall man, broad-shouldered and gifted with dark good looks, stepped out of one of the nearby self-operating elevators. He walked across the small well-appointed lobby with the springing grace of a bounding buck. He wore a tan suit that had cost at least $200, Denny estimated grimly; yellow shirt, Italian shoes. The man had also just bought a cream-colored Cadillac.

Denny stared down at the register, trying to look preoccupied. Jack Beeker had come to town just six weeks ago, with slight hotel experience from San Francisco. He'd gotten a job on the desk, working swing, four to midnight. Now, just six weeks later, Beeker had taken from Denny the job that he had been counting on for years: that of assistant manager, a position finally vacated two weeks ago and refilled by Andy Applehoff, manager, with the yellow-shirted Jack Beeker. Beeker, in his weeks in Reno, had also taken something else from Denny Mulhane. He'd taken Denny's bride of two years: Sharon, a sweet-looking blonde with an angel's face.

Denny felt incredulous that it had actually happened, but it had.

Now, Beeker, with a rich, snappy voice, said "Come on, Mulhane. Are we running a mortuary?" A hand wearing a flashing ring on the little finger slapped the desk. "How much did you hold out of the last check-out tip, huh?"

Denny stared at the man in total resentment. "I've never held out on a tip in my life!" he said honestly. The hotel tips were pooled among the bellmen and desk clerks—just as they were pooled upstairs in the casino among members of a given game and shift. Yet Denny had been certain that Beeker, when he'd been on the desk, had held out just as much as he'd figured he could get away with. Where was the justice?

"I ever catch you at it," Beeker said, "you're finished. Trim up, Mulhane, or you're gone."

"Listen . . ." Denny managed, feeling his voice leaving him.

"To what?"

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"Sharon . . ." he whispered, gripping his hands into fists.

"Stay away from her."

"What?"

"I said stay away from her!"

"But—she's my wife!"

Beeker's dark look passed; his white smile gleamed. "Is that right?"

"I married her! Legally!"

"I thought she kicked you out."

"That's none of your business!"

"Are you honestly being serious, Mulhane?"

"I tell you—"

"Keep your voice down. You'll wake them up all the way to the top floor. Get hold of yourself, Mulhane. Sharon's done with you. And I don't want you going over there bothering her anymore."

Denny felt his teeth gritting. He'd gone back to his own house just once after Sharon had shouted at him to leave two weeks ago. He'd tried to talk sense to her, but it had been no use. Now, he'd heard that Beeker had moved in. *His* house! *His* wife!

The telephone on the desk rang. Beeker arrogantly lifted it and said, "Beeker." His smile flashed again, and his voice took on the texture of false subservience. "Right, Andy. Be straight up." He put the telephone down and eyed Denny with cool contempt. "Shape up, keep away from Sharon, and maybe one of these days I'll put in a raise for you. How about two cents a week?" He grinned, heeled about and disappeared into an elevator to go up to the administrative floor to confer with Andy Applehoff, the manager.

He should be doing that, Denny thought. Yet Beeker had *everything* . . .

He shook his head, eyes misting. No, he was not going to be assistant manager. Even the job he now held had become impossible under Beeker. So, finally, he made the decision he knew he should have made earlier. As soon as that conference was over upstairs, he would give Andy Applehoff notice, then try for another front-desk job in town. If he couldn't find anything here, he would have to leave, giving up virtually everything.

Five minutes later the elevator opened, and Jack Beeker stepped out, face flushed with anger. Denny stared as the man marched grimly across the lobby and out the glassed door to the drive. Beeker stopped, walked down the macadam, turned around and stopped again, as though he had been moving blindly. Then, dark eyes gleaming, he came back inside to get on an elevator, which rose and then stopped, Denny saw by the indicator, at casino level.

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Minutes later Andy Applehoff got out of a second elevator and walked across the lobby to stop by the desk and stare out the window, eyes looking mean. He was a short man, broadly built, in his early sixties, with short-cropped white hair. "That creep," he said in his rusty voice.

"What?" Denny asked.

"Beeker."

"I don't understand."

"I fired him. He was trying to con the maids into crossroading tips with him!"

Denny stared at the man, feeling a wild joy beginning down deep inside of him. "Fired him—out of hand?"

"That's right."

"Well . . . who's going to take his place?"

Applehoff looked at Denny coldly. "Whoever I decide is going to."

Harry Briggs, the new swing clerk, relieved Denny punctually at a quarter to four. Briggs was tall, extraordinarily skinny, and yet had a perfectly round, slightly plump face. He rested his knob-knuckled hands on the register and said, "How many squirrels, freaks and baboons have we got in this zoo today?"

"Half full," Denny said.

"That's half too many," Briggs said. "What else is new? Nothing?"

"Applehoff fired Beeker."

Briggs' smile widened slowly. "That's going to make me feel good all the way into next week!"

Denny took an elevator up to the casino level and went into the men's room to wash. He dampened his thinning brown hair and combed it carefully. Then, in ritualistic fashion, he went up front to the main bar to sit down at the end, where Joey, a small quick-eyed man with sleek black hair, rested between mixing drinks. "Welcome, Denny," Joey said, sliding out a cocktail napkin. "You got it coming."

"Okay," Denny said gratefully, so accustomed to the action of the casino by now that he paid no attention whatever to the chants at the crap tables and the ringing of jackpot bells. The lounge entertainment didn't start on the stage behind the bar until five—and by that time he would be gone. Mostly he liked to talk to Joey.

With savor, he watched Joey overpour gin into a glass partially filled with cracked ice. The bartender impaled an olive on a plastic toothpick, poured a tiny amount of vermouth on the olive, shook it to remove any excess, then plunged the olive into the gin and put the glass in front of Denny. "One very dry, over." He took the

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bill Denny had placed on the wood, made change, then looked at Denny with a grin. "How do you feel?"

"Good."

"You ought to. That fathead thought he was going to be manager in a few weeks. Now he's out on his tail."

"How'd you know?"

"He came up here after Applehoff axed him. He was drinking until five minutes ago. The bum."

Denny tasted his drink, smiling.

"The great Beeker," Joey said sarcastically.

"How did he take it?"

"Hard. Called Applehoff all the names he knows, which are plenty."

Denny smiled again.

"That bum thought he'd lucked out," Joey said with feeling. "Only it dissolved on him." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the bar. "Maybe it isn't any of my business, Denny—but are you going to take her back?"

Denny began blinking rapidly. He'd been thinking only of Beeker getting fired, he realized. He hadn't considered how it would be for Sharon until now.

"Maybe it *is* none of my business," Joey said. "But what would she see in that bum now? He's lucky he didn't get eighty-sixed! Where's he going to get a decent job now? He fooled Applehoff, all right, but not for long. He won't fool Sharon anymore, either, I figure. You want her back, Denny?"

Denny closed his hand around his glass, tightly. "I'll think about it."

"Yeah, right," Joey nodded. "You think about it, Denny. You got that privilege now, you know."

Denny did think about it most of the night, sleeping only minutes in the inexpensive motel where he now lived. Then he drove to work, telling himself that Sharon had been very young, after all, when they'd got married. Could you blame her, really, for tumbling head over heels for a guy like Jack Beeker, as she had done shortly after Denny had introduced her to him? Naive, trusting, inexperienced, she simply hadn't been aware of what she was doing. Forgiveness, Denny told himself righteously, was a quality of worth.

She usually slept late, and so he waited until eleven, then lifted the desk telephone, got an outside line and dialed the familiar number. After several rings, she answered in a high, sleepy voice, "Yeah?"

"Denny, Sharon," he said, feeling his heart begin to beat faster.

"I wouldn't know that?"

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"Well—how are you?" he asked.

"Half asleep. What the hell time is it, anyway?"

She'd never sworn before she'd met Beeker—and what else had he taught her? But Denny swiftly drove that conjecture from his mind. Instead, he tried to be calm, convincing, reassuring. After all, she'd been through an experience.

"Eleven o'clock," he said.

"So why wake me this time of day, huh?"

"Do you know what happened to Jack Beeker?"

"He was fired. Is *that* why you woke me up?"

"Well, do you know why? I mean, like he was trying to split tips with the maids, and—"

"Baloney. Applehoff made that up because he was afraid Jack would have his job in another week."

Denny took a breath, then said carefully, "Sharon, I have to talk to you."

"What else do you call this?"

"I mean in person."

"Don't you understand yet? Can't you get it through your head?"

"It's really important, Sharon. I swear. How about lunch? In the coffee shop?"

He could hear her sighing.

"Okay, all right, I'll be there about one-thirty."

Then she hung up the receiver.

When Denny stepped into the coffee shop at 1:30, he could see that she hadn't yet arrived. He asked for a booth for two, then kept looking at his watch as he waited. Finally he saw her, and he forgot all else as he watched her moving toward him, her face set in a cool expression of resignation. She was as beautiful as ever, although he was fairly sure she'd put on an extra pound or two. She was wearing a new coat he'd never seen before. Her hair was arranged in a different style. But it was Sharon, all right, and she was sitting beside him again.

"This is great!" he said. "This is just wonderful."

"Yeah. And it better be important. I'll have a gimlet, please."

"You never used to drink before lunch, honey."

"This is before breakfast. And call me Sharon."

Feeling subdued, he ordered the drink for her, as well as sandwiches, which she said she wanted. He'd expected her to have warmed a little by the time she arrived but then, of course, she still didn't understand how wrong it had gone for Jack Beeker.

"All right," she said, arching her eyebrows. "What's so important I've got to jump out of bed, dress and run down here? You want a di-

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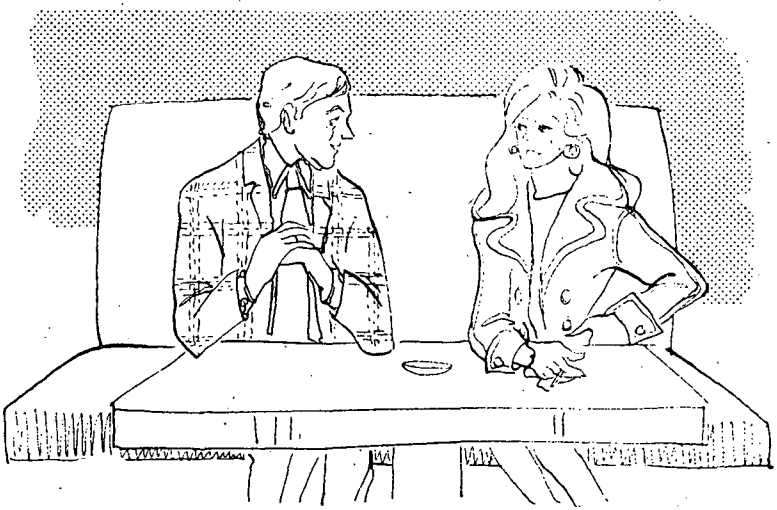

vorce now, all of a sudden?"

He felt his face warming. "Divorce!"

"If you do, you've got it. No sweat." There was something different about her eyes, and the way she held herself, and even the way she talked now.

"I don't want a divorce."

"What do you want, then?"

"I'm willing to forgive and forget, Sharon. I'm willing to come home!"

She looked at him incredulously. "Oh, my hero!"

Then his emotion turned to anger. "Sharon, I'm being very generous about this. You don't understand what's happened. Jack Beeker gave you a song and dance. All right, I understand that. But you have to realize that it's over for him. He was fired for cheating on tips. He can't get a recommendation for another job like that. That means he's finished. What does he really know, anyway? Where's his talent?"

She looked at him brightly. "You want to know?"

His forehead prickled with perspiration. "I'd be careful if I were you, Sharon! Divorce! Well, I could get one. And it would go my way, wouldn't it? He's living in our house and everybody knows it! You wouldn't get a cent of alimony."

"That's a loss? On *your* salary?"

"You tell me, then! What's Jack Beeker got to offer you *now*?"

"Aside from his talent, you mean."

"I'm warning you, Sharon . . ."

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"I don't need any warning, especially from you. Your tires were blown out when I married you. I know now what I was missing, including in the neighborhood of forty-two thousand dollars. Make it *exactly* forty-two thousand." Her voice had gone down to a whisper.

"What are you talking about?"

"Jack was so mad last night he decided to take it out on gambling. He hit every casino in town. Craps and blackjack. He couldn't lose! And we've got that bundle put away now. What do you think of that, Charlie Brown?"

Denny sat there feeling his blood pumping. The sandwiches had been delivered. He stared at his plate, finding it out of focus. "No!" he said.

"No what?" Sharon said, tipping her glass up.

"It's not fair! He shouldn't *have* that kind of luck."

"He knows the rules of the game he's playing. He isn't afraid to take a chance when it's running good. That's something you never understood. You make your *own* luck." She put down her empty glass. "He's waiting for me at the front bar."

He spread his hands, feeling bewildered now. "You didn't eat your sandwich."

"You eat it. Then go back to your front desk where you're going to be stuck the rest of your life. When you get done with that, go home and play with your rubber duck, or whatever it is you're doing these days."

When Denny left the desk later that afternoon he knew very sincerely that he needed the large and dry martini that Joey would pour for him. He sat on his favorite stool as Joey made the drink. Then the small bartender leaned forward solicitously. "That bum, Beeker. I saw you go into the coffee shop, then her later. And that guy sits here and drinks three fast ones like he hasn't got a worry in the world. Big smile on his face. Oh, he shot off about Applehoff firing him. But it's like he doesn't realize he's finished!"

Denny drank his drink swiftly. Normally he made it last at least thirty minutes, but not now. He felt fevered.

"Want another, for a change, Denny?" Joey asked. "Tomorrow's a day off."

"No," he said. He got up and walked through the length of the casino, turned a corner where the elevators were and stepped into one of the public telephone booths there. He put a dime in the slot and dialed the hotel's number. When the switchboard operator answered, he said in a reedy voice,

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"Andy Applehoff's office, please."

Applehoff's rusty voice responded, and Denny lowered his to a whisper. "You've been asking for it, Applehoff. You're going to get it. I've got a bomb in that joint. Any minute it's going to blow you and the rest of the clowns there all the way to Salt Lake City. All you got to do is figure out when it goes."

He hung up and sat for a moment, then he stepped out of the booth, hearing a voice on the loudspeaker saying urgently, "Security Code Seven! Hotel manager's office!" He met a large security guard moving quickly toward the elevators. The threat would get the whole department converging.

He took an escalator down to the parking lot in the rear. As he stepped outside, a patrol car rocked to a halt. Officers spilled out and ran for the back entrance. One of them was named Regis, the police department's demolition expert.

Denny walked toward his old sedan parked at the end of the lot, a slight jauntiness going into his stride. Sunset was just beginning, with a refreshingly cool edge to the late breeze. He loved sunsets in this town. They were pink. He'd lived in other places and seen a lot of other sunsets, but never like Reno's. Reno's were pink and beautiful, and he began to whistle a little tune.

He drove to the edge of town where there was an excellent roadhouse, and sat very silently at the bar over his second martini, contemplating. He felt relaxed now, and his mind was moving easily, thinking absolutely clear thoughts. Andy Applehoff usually worked split shifts in order to keep everyone on his toes. This evening he would remain at the hotel until eight. The entire hotel personnel would be in a frenzy as a result of that bomb threat. They'd had them before, and so far the threats had proven to be idle. Still, you could never be sure.

A slim bartender stopped in front of Denny and asked, "Dry enough?"

"Right. And let's have another, shall we?"

He got up and walked to a telephone booth near the entrance, then dialed the hotel and asked for Applehoff. The man answered with tension in his voice. "Tick, tick," Denny whispered. "Boom, boom. Any second, Simplehoff." He hung up and walked cheerfully back to the bar where his new drink was waiting.

He settled for that, then had a huge, delicious steak in a rustic dining room, each fact of his intention falling into place. When

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he'd finished the meal, he paid his check, then stopped at the telephone booth on his way out. He called the hotel again.

"How would you like a trip to the moon, Applehoff?"

Back in his motel unit he changed into old clothes—polo shirt, chinos, sneakers. Then he lay on his back on his bed in dim light and thought of his own house—that place from which he'd been banished by his own wife, where Jack Beeker now reigned. It was in a rather old, middle-class neighborhood near the edge of town: quiet streets, trees, entirely comfortable. He remembered how, during his stretch in the Army, he'd dreamed of living in a house just like that with a girl who looked exactly as Sharon did.

Well, he could hit her with a divorce and have both thrown out of there—but there was also another way of handling it.

He looked at his watch, then got up and put on a Windbreaker. He went down the block to a public booth and called the hotel again. Applehoff was now gone, he was told. "All right," he said hoarsely. "But it's going to blow just the same." It would keep them searching, he knew, like mice for cheese. Three hundred rooms, plus casino, plus lobby, plus administrative offices, plus rest rooms, plus closets, plus dining rooms, plus coffee shop, plus kitchen, plus basement, plus . . .

Good luck, he thought, and got into his car and drove east until he was a dozen blocks from his house. He parked in darkness on a silent street, then moved on foot until he was just a block from his house. There, he darted into an alley and ran lightly until he was at the rear of the structure. He saw light showing against the drapes of the livingroom as well as light behind the shades of the kitchen. He still had his own keys, and he quietly inserted one into the door leading to a short hallway where steps led up to the kitchen and down to the basement.

He went in and down the steps. He could hear them talking upstairs, and he felt a wild fury for a moment. Then he controlled it and went directly to an old-fashioned trunk, confident in the darkness because he knew the area so well. As he opened the trunk, the lid hinges squeaked, but he was almost sure that it couldn't be heard above. He worked his hand down to a cardboard box in a corner. He picked it up, closed the trunk and started back for the steps leading up and out. Then light flashed above. He saw the shadow of a figure there.

"Listen," Sharon said, "I don't

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see why you can't lower yourself just once to take out the garbage."

He heard Beeker's rumbling laughter. "Is that what you want out of me, baby?"

Sharon giggled. Denny, pressing himself against the wall at the foot of the stairway, felt himself heating with fresh anger. He saw his wife's trim ankles as she went outside. There was a ringing sound of the garbage can's lid being lifted and put back. Then she returned inside and went up to the kitchen to close the door behind her.

Ten minutes later Denny was back in his motel, opening that box.

The next morning, late, he returned to his own neighborhood and parked his car blocks from his house. The sun was shining clearly, and there was a smell of sage in the air from a light wind blowing in from the surrounding desert. Wearing a topcoat over his sports jacket and slacks, as well as thin leather gloves, he made a swift trip through alleys until he reached his house, certain that his journey had been unobserved.

He arrived just in time to see Sharon getting into a cab. Jack Beeker's precious Cadillac was parked at the curb in front of the house. She was probably going to get her hair done, an activity to which she was addicted. He was glad she was leaving; it would simplify what he had to do now.

He knocked on the back door. Minutes later Jack Beeker, with a day's growth of beard, looking hung over, opened it and stared at him in surprise and irritation. "What do you want, Mulhane? I told you to stay away from here."

"I've got a right to get some things from this place!" Denny said, putting a note of almost juvenile hysteria in his voice.

"Like what?"

"If I have to call the cops, I'll get them!"

"All right, you crazy nut! Come in and collect what you want and get out of here!"

Beeker turned, and Denny followed him through the kitchen to the livingroom. The room was, Denny saw without surprise, in an entirely unkempt condition. He quickly chose a cigarette lighter on an end table, a framed diploma indicating his degree from a trade school teaching hotel business, hanging on the wall, and a silver-bladed letter opener resting beside the telephone on the coffee table. He said he wanted all three items.

"So take them!" Beeker said caustically.

Denny removed the diploma from the wall and, holding it as he would a tray, put the lighter and letter opener on it. Then he said,

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"That's too bad about your nice car."

"What are you talking about?" Beeker asked.

"Somebody banged into it."

"It hasn't got a mark on it!"

"When was the last time you looked?"

Beeker charged out the front door. Denny, knowing he'd come to the moment of action, put down the three items he'd been holding and looped a gloved finger around the inside of the receiver end of the telephone. Lifting it, he dialed a number with the tip of the letter opener's blade, seeing that Beeker had reached the car. When the operator at the hotel answered, he said in a whisper, "Tell Applehoff this is it. I'm blowing him out of this world."

He dropped the telephone into place, then moved toward a bookcase which contained his collected volumes as well as an old coffee grinder which Sharon had found in an antique store and placed on a center shelf as a decoration. It was a square wooden box, with a black iron grinder handle on top. When it had been in use, ground coffee was removed by sliding open a drawer at the bottom where it had been collected during the grinding. Using the tips of his gloved fingers, Denny slid open the drawer and saw what he'd expected: a sheaf of currency.

He removed the bills, pocketed them and slid the drawer shut, heart beating fast. Sharon had always foolishly, but stubbornly, insisted that it was the place to put away money kept in the house. She should have used the false book on that shelf, an item that looked quite genuine with its relic-looking leather cover and gold-etched title reading: *The History Of Nevada Railroads*. He'd found it in a curio shop and bought it to store away valuables. He'd finally decided a bank safety deposit box would be safer. Now, however, he was going to find a purpose for it.

He picked up the framed diploma, letter opener and lighter just moments before Beeker, looking grim, returned to the livingroom. "What's the matter with you, anyway? There isn't a scratch on that car!"

"Well, I thought there was. I guess it was the way the sun was shining on it."

"So all right. Get some glasses. You got all the junk you want?"

"All but that book on the shelf. The leather-bound one, on railroads. It isn't really a book, but I've owned it all of my life. It's something my mother gave me. If you'll please give it to me, I'll leave."

Swearing angrily, Beeker reached up to the shelf, brought

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the false book down, looked at the empty interior, slapped the cover shut and put it on the diploma which Denny was again holding tray-style. "Get out of here now, will you?"

sand dollars were there. He tucked them into a well-stamped heavy manila envelope he'd prepared earlier and read what he'd printed on the front: Mr. John J. Coppel, General Delivery, Reno, Nevada.

Denny went back along alleys until he reached his own car. He drove off and then stopped again, farther away. He removed the bills from his pocket and counted them, finding that a full forty-two thou-

He licked the glue and sealed the flap.

He picked up a paper bag from the floor and removed the contents, which included a small old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock, as

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well as the object he'd taken from the basement trunk the night before: a grenade which he'd felt compelled to smuggle through the gates of his Army post years ago as a souvenir, one of the very few minor indiscretions he'd ever committed in his life—until now.

His fingers worked deftly. Then he closed the cover and put the fake book on the seat beside him.

Driving on, he saw two police cars speeding in the direction from which he'd come. His heart was pounding, and he could feel moisture on his palms, inside his gloves, but he was smiling now.

When he'd parked behind the hotel, he got out and put the book inside his topcoat, clamped under his arm, then walked toward the building. He dropped the manila envelope into the employees' mail slot just inside. Then he went up to casino level and picked up a house phone to say. "This is security. Send Mr. Applehoff down here fast."

He hung up and got on one of the self-operating elevators, punching the administration-floor button. As he stepped out on that floor, Andy Applehoff came around a corner.

"Listen, Andy—"

"I'm in a hurry, Denny."

"Well, I'll wait for you in your office, okay?"

"Yeah, all right," Applehoff said, getting on the elevator.

Denny turned the corner and walked down the corridor until he came to a small anteroom between the manager's large office and the smaller one for the assistant manager. Shirley, the plump and pretty girl who worked as secretary for both, looked up and said, "If I had a day off I wouldn't be here, Denny. Didn't you hear?"

"Well, that's why I came down, to see what's going on. Probably a crank, huh?"

"We'd better hope."

"Meantime Andy asked me to wait in his office."

Shirley pointed to the door. "Be my guest."

Denny stepped into the large office with its thick rug and massive dark desk, bumping the door nearly shut with his elbow. He walked across the room and quickly went around the desk where there was a small bookshelf containing a few volumes Applehoff had collected for office reference—law statutes, hotel codes, some others. Denny put his false book with its faintly ticking sound on a shelf in a position that would be just behind Applehoff's head should he be sitting in his chair.

Then Denny removed his gloves, took off his topcoat and sat down in a leather chair. He looked at his

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watch. He took a breath. He waited, listening to that ticking sound.

Minutes later Andy Applehoff marched into the office and sat down, shaking his head. "I've had about as much as I can take! Phony security calls. Those damnable bomb threats Jack Beeker made!"

"Beeker?" Denny said, trying very hard to look surprised. "*He* was the one?"

"Yeah, they nailed him out at your house. I got the call just before I saw you in the hall. I haven't even told Shirley yet," Applehoff said.

"*How?*" Denny asked.

"If the fool had been half on his feet when he was working here, he'd have known the switchboard can be rigged to trace a call, once a bomb scare is up. Takes the telephone company into the next day to do it, but they did. So that creep phoned in another threat about twenty minutes ago, and they had him. He owned a beef against me, and there's the motive. But *you* knew that tracer equipment could be installed, didn't you, Denny?"

"Well," Denny said, "I guess I did, as a matter of fact. So they arrested him?"

"He's wild, they say. He's so desperate he says *you* were out there and made the call while he stepped outside. How do you like that?"

"He's wild, all right. Why would I have wanted to go out there?"

"I guess they'll want to talk to you, but that's what *I* told them. With him and Sharon there together? Well—they can get him fairly good on the threat alone. But if he'd actually tried to set off a bomb, they'd put him away until he gets old. I tell you—"

"Listen, Andy," Denny ordered crisply.

"What?"

"Listen!"

The room became silent except for a soft ticking. Denny got up, pointing at the bookshelf. "That doesn't belong here! That's out of my house!"

"What are you talking about?" Applehoff said, flying out of his chair.

Denny went around the desk and removed the leather-bound book from the shelf to put it on Applehoff's blotter. "It's fake—hollow—but there's something inside now. Listen to it tick!"

"You're right! Denny, let's get out of here!"

Applehoff was moving for the door as Denny opened the cover and then took a penknife from his pocket.

"Get away from that thing!" Applehoff shouted.

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Denny worked the knife gingerly. Then he nodded. "It's okay, Andy. I just put it out of business."

A week later Denny sat behind the desk in the assistant manager's office, going over a shift schedule. He was working days, this week, and it was nearly time to quit. He slipped the schedule into a drawer as Andy Applehoff stepped in.

"I've got to say it all over again, Denny—how grateful I am. That thing was set to go off in another two minutes!" Applehoff shook his head, paling. "Would have blown my head off, if you hadn't seen it. And then, when you deactivated it, I saw a man I'd never seen before. I'm sorry I took so long, Denny. I'll try to make up for it. I'm not going to be working too much longer. You know who'll take over when I leave, right?"

Denny smiled. "That's mighty nice to hear, Andy. But anybody would have done the same thing I did."

"That's not true. Have a good night, Denny."

As Applehoff left him, Denny's phone rang. He lifted it. "Yes?"

"Denny? Is that you? Is there anybody else on the line? Can we talk?"

"It's me, Sharon, and the secretary's off now. And, yes, we can talk. What's on your mind, pray tell?"

"Denny," she said plaintively, "Jack's sure you framed him. He keeps shouting at them that you did. At me, too, when I visit him. But it doesn't help him, does it?"

"I think that's been gone over pretty well. I don't believe anyone's put any credence in it at all."

"Well, but, see, it's something else, too. It's that I didn't tell anyone else but you about that big win Jack had; *no*body, and neither did he. He figured the cops did that—you know, got the money after they hustled him into a police car. Like there was a whole gang of them swooped in on him after they traced the call, and they searched the place. Well, I didn't tell him I told you about that money. He might have even tried to kill me through the bars, if he'd known that. Only now I'm glad I *did*, because I know you remembered about the coffee grinder and looked when you sent Jack out to look at his car, and . . . Honey, you *did*, didn't you? For *me*! I'm so proud of you! If you want, when you go home tonight, I could be there again, too. Like it used to be? Just you and me, Denny . . ."

He put the phone on its cradle and stood up, stretching. Then he slipped on his jacket and stepped into the anteroom to see that Shir-

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ley had already gone. He looked into Andy Applehoff's large office, examining it, eyes shining.

Then he went down to casino level and to the main bar where Joey mixed his drink. He placed it in front of Denny, saying, "One double-dry for the new assistant you-know-what. Hot damn!"

Denny smiled and tasted his drink.

"I'm telling you," Joey said, shaking his head, "that guy is really getting his. I hear his fingerprints were all over the phone at your place, so they damn well *know* who made that threat. All over the fake book, too. Had the sense to wipe clean the stuff he used to rig the thing inside, but he left his prints all over the leather outside! I call that dumb."

"My prints were on it, too."

"Well, sure! Just from taking it off the shelf and putting the thing out of commission. They say Beeker must have sneaked it in during the night and Applehoff just didn't notice. It was fixed to blow, all right. That took guts, Denny. Plenty of guts."

"I don't know," Denny said modestly, thinking that he had quite a lot of time before he was going to call for the manila envelope at the post office. "A man does what he has to do."

"Well, you did. And I hear they're going to cut Beeker's heart out and fry it."

"Maybe not that bad."

"Bad enough. That guy had all the luck in the world going. I guess he figured it wouldn't quit. But it did. It really gave out on him."

"Well, maybe sometimes a man makes his own luck, Joey," Denny said.

"Yeah, well . . ." Joey said, nodding. "Maybe he does, at that."

"Yes," Denny said positively, "I think so."

Then, when he'd finished the drink, he took an escalator down to the parking lot. As he walked toward his car, he saw that the sunset was beginning. *Pink*, he thought, *and beautiful; more beautiful than I've ever seen it before.*

He strode along, a definite swagger in his movement, and whistled a bright and cheery tune.

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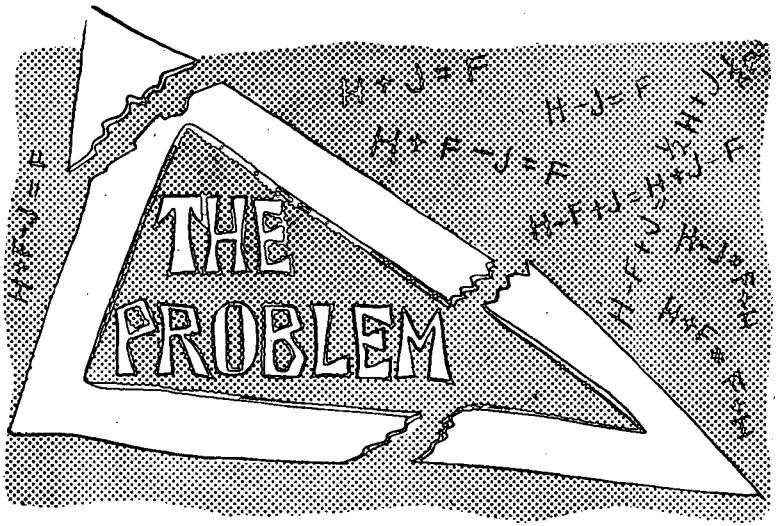
New math notwithstanding, again it is proved, beyond any doubt, that an arithmetical problem has but one answer, irrevocable and accurate.



by Pauline C. Smith

JAMES JAMES was a precise, narrow-shouldered man who lived a precise, narrow-bordered life. His days were occupied with the business of accounting and his evenings with the hobby of solving tricky arithmetical problems in game books. He maintained a neatly modest apartment and drove a well-kept three-year-old-compact.

James was a replete and satisfied man. If he had an ambition beyond any already achieved, it could only be to discover a problem greater than he had before encountered.

It was during an early twilight in the late fall of 1965 that James James first saw her, or rather *it*, as a problem in transportation. She was standing at the side of the

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road helplessly peering under the hood of her disabled car, a pretty young woman had she not allowed herself to appear so plain, and a passionate one, too, should a man—any man—arouse the hidden fire.

James eased his compact carefully to the shoulder of the road, switched off the ignition, set his parking brake, pocketed his keys, stepped to the pavement, introduced himself and took over under the hood.

While he was a mathematician and not a mechanic, he figured, geometrically, that a motor is, or should be an equation of parts to become functional once one entity equals another, and so he quickly found the loose wire that had caused the trouble.

The young woman, Helen Helinski, fourth grade schoolteacher, single, on her way home to an anxious invalid father, gave thanks and purred her now reactivated motor into life and moved off down the highway.

James followed at a respectful distance, not as an act of gallantry but rather to prove the lasting accuracy of his solution. Upon arriving at her apartment building, he accepted her invitation to coffee, not to further a human relationship, but because he was in the habit of rewarding himself with a slight caffein stimulant after the successful completion of a complex calculation.

It was within the apartment and under the blazing eyes of the tyrannical old man in the wheelchair that James James became aware of a confrontation with a paralogism rather than a postulate, and took it to himself for solution. *The old man did not like him. As a matter of fact, the old man hated him. The old man wanted him out of this apartment. The old man wished his daughter for himself.*

James then gazed upon Helen Helinski and found her to be a woman; and after backing from the apartment into the hall, his coffee only half-finished, he asked her for a date.

She looked confused, and fluttered.

He gave her a choice: an evening of viewing the chess tournament then in progress, or one of studying the new mathematical exhibit at the museum.

She chose either.

What she really chose was the man—just any man—even James James, and under the plainness, her prettiness flowered; under her modesty, the passion flamed, for here was a potential, a wonderful possibility to snatch her from the spinster class into the glorious safely-wed-and-into-bed area.

She lowered her eyes as she

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chose either, for she was choosing only one, a man.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, she was not to view the chess tournament or walk through the math exhibit either, for upon learning of her wanton evening's abandonment, Father Helinski immediately became an instant-mathematician on his own. Seeing the writing on the wall, he threw a massive heart attack that involved Helen, every tenant in the apartment building, two doctors and, finally, James.

The problem became a classic. Two entities who ought to be added were unrelentingly divided by the whim of an old man who certainly should be subtracted.

The problem intrigued James, who worked a linear equation that evolved as Helen + James = Father Helinski. He proceeded to a quadratic equation and came up with Helen + Father Helinski — James = Father. He then continued to cubic equation where Helen — Father + James = Helen + James — Father, and operated upon this computerized wavelength, conniving telephonically to transpose the denominator to the numerator, thereby causing Helen to lie to the integer and thus bring about, hopefully, a final hyperbola equilateral for a mathematician working on the solution of his biggest problem to date. His pencil fairly flew.

James found it fascinating.

At least once a week, Helen managed a parent-teacher meeting and met him, instead, where they had great fun over coffee. Now and then, she conjured a student-assembly rehearsal for the benefit of her father. At those times, they attended a movie, provided it wasn't rated X.

After the first four or five spaced meetings, shy and almost speechless on Helen's part and bright with the insouciance of numerical conversation on the part of James, he kissed her! The kiss was planted briefly, partly because of propinquitous conformity, a little of atavism, and also because James wanted that equation to come out as he had planned. The kiss did terrible and wonderful things to Helen. In it she discovered deep churnings she had never before known, and great desires she would like to know.

The kiss caused erotic dreams from which she awoke blushing and dissatisfied.

During the winter James asked Helen to marry him; not in those words, of course, but more according to the Pythagorean theorem propounding that the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle being equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides,

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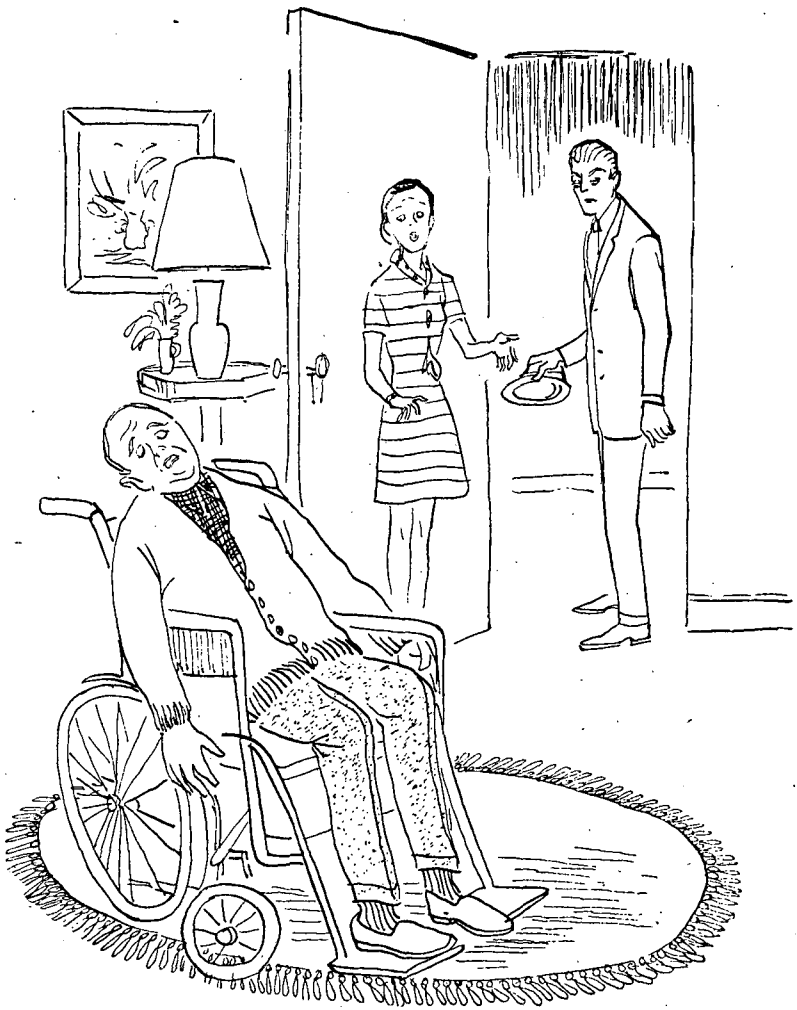

the three of them ought to be able to live together in harmony, provided the father was placed in a suitable nursing home.

"Oh, no!" cried Helen, and even as she swayed yearningly toward him, her back remained rigid. "Daddy made me promise to take care of him for the rest of his life. He says I owe him that much—to

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stay single and take care of him."

From that time on, each meeting began with a question. "How is your father?" asked James, wishing the old coot would disappear.

"About the same," answered Helen, wishing he would too.

James thought vaguely of annihilation. Oh, nothing violent like gun-shooting murder, that being too direct, and he might be found out. He pondered upon more circuitous methods, like inflicting a deadly shock by announcing to Mr. Helinski that he planned to marry his daughter, or even by just stepping inside the apartment—but that would be cheating and James James had never, in his life, cheated on a math problem.

So the meetings continued to occur through and into late winter, beginning with the question, "How is your father?" and ending with a chaste kiss that sent Helen home to her bed and her erotic dreams which extended so far but no farther, because she had no knowledge within her subconscious with which to dream, and James wasn't giving her any.

It was at the beginning of spring, in March, when it appeared that James' cubic equation, Helen — Father + James = Helen + James — Father, was about to be solved. The old man, felled by another attack, was trundled to the hospital with a very unfavorable prognosis.

James' meetings with Helen during that month occurred at a coffee shop across the street from the hospital where she kept vigil during her hours free of school. It was in the coffee shop where James first learned that the old man was going to make it, and there he heard the further news that was to change his equation into one even more complex.

While Helen spoke with downcast eyes—no, actually *planned* with lowered lids—James was working out this new equation: Helen — Father + James = ½ Helen + James — ½ Father, and while it was not a perfect solution, still it halfway solved the problem.

Daddy, Helen explained with veiled eyes, would now need full-time care and had, by necessity, consented to enter a nursing home but only providing Helen promised to visit him each weekend and further providing that she drive him to their vacation cottage at an Oregon lake each summer and spend her three-month vacations in the proper care and spinster-vigilance of her invalid father.

"So," said Helen with becoming modesty, "I thought, James, that I could continue to be Daddy's daughter, yet married to you," which was all she wanted anyway, the opportunity of experiencing in

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actuality the conclusion to her half-fulfilled dreams. The fact that others wouldn't know of her completion was unimportant, just so that she did.

The turbulent promise deep in her eyes when she raised them to James escaped him. He was too busy compromising the uneasy solution to his equation. Not quite satisfied, displeased with having his digits dangle, but even more displeased at the thought of a forever-unfinished problem, James married Helen during a private civil ceremony the minute Mr. Helinski was safely ensconced in a nursing home fifty miles from the city. All that remained, then, was to change the nameplate over his apartment mailbox to read: *Mr. and Mrs. James James.*

Helen was recognized by that name only on the mailbox. Since no tenant in the building had known James James as a bachelor, except to nod to in the elevator, no tenant now knew him as a married man, except to nod twice in the elevator. So with an impersonal nod, and in a mailbox slot, Helen was married.

At school, she remained Miss Helinski, teacher. At the nursing home, which she visited each weekend, she was Miss Helinski, daughter. She sometimes thought that in the cool of her nuptial bed she was Miss Helinski, number. However, she quickly put such a thought aside as being not only unseemly but bordering on the obscene.

During the April and May of their union, Helen didn't actually bloom with James' love, for his love was too passive for blooming, but rather she budded with delicate serenity. Her budding was noticed by her teacher co-workers who thought hers was the tranquility of having her father off her neck, observed by her pupils who took advantage of her patience, and only regarded by her husband as being proof-positive of his judgment at having selected a mate so tidy, so even-tempered and understanding.

By June, with school over for the year and Mr. Helinski at the nursing home recovered enough for travel, Helen packed and readied the station wagon she had recently acquired in a trade-in, and took off for a summer with her father.

James gave her a farewell kiss as he left for his office on the morning of her departure and didn't realize that the apartment would feel so empty that evening with her gone.

The emptiness, rather than abating, increased through the days and weeks and finally the months

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of the summer. His game problems hadn't the stimulation they had once held for him, nor the absorption they had once accomplished. James cut down on coffee, went on a health-food diet and took multiple vitamins, thinking that he must be sick, at least sluggish, to be so apathetic toward a hobby that had been the passion of his entire adult life.

The summer passed with no letters (a letter would upset Daddy) and no telephone calls. There was no phone at the cottage and because she could not leave Daddy, Helen must have someone from the mainland bring over her weekly supplies, therefore would be unable to reach a phone to make or to receive calls.

After closing the books of those clients with a June fiscal year, James' summer accounting business was slack. With remarkable lack of interest, he attended a chess tournament, audited a math symposium, read a new volume of calculus, and that was about it.

Then, miraculously, once Helen had returned, having deposited her father in the nursing home, James' interest in mathematical game books was suddenly revived, and the solving of problems again became a fascinating pastime. He drank rewarding cups of coffee as before, allowed himself to forego his health foods, and once the multiple vitamins were gone, he failed to reorder.

With fall, the new year became a pleasant and ordered pattern. Each morning, James off to his office and Helen to school, they descended the apartment elevator together, nodding to their stranger-neighbors who, in turn, nodded back doubly. Once past the mailbox slot that labeled her Mrs. James, Helen became Miss Helinski—tidy, even-tempered and understanding, but with an inner flame that caused the faculty to remark, one to the other, "I never realized Miss Helinski was so pretty. She fluffs her hair now, that's what, and she used to wear it plain. She smiles more often too." All the teachers were women. Had there been a man on the staff, he could have seen in Helen a budding sexpot, and would probably have sought to bring her to flower.

There were no other men in Helen's life. There was only her father who clung with weak tyranny, and James who looked up, now and then, from his circles, his angles, and his parallelograms to find her comfortably and quietly there.

"How was your summer?" he asked.

"Very pleasant," she said.

"And your father?"

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"As well as can be expected."

It was all very nice. The solution, even though it had come out ½ Helen and ½ Father, was most satisfactory. It was satisfaction, decided James, that caused the fullness of his chest and the occasional quick and passionate breathing that sometimes troubled him. He also thought it a reflection of that satisfaction when he caught the sometimes flash of invitation in Helen's eyes.

The year proceeded from fall through winter and into late spring, when it again became time for Helen to pack and ready the station wagon for her trip with her father to the cottage by the lake.

"Does your father stand the trip well?" asked James.

"Yes," said Helen.

"Is he difficult to care for through the summer?"

"Not too difficult," she said.

This year of their marriage had proved to be a disappointment to Helen, a matter which she did not admit to herself, not knowing for sure what it lacked, only that it had never quite reached the shy ecstasy of her maiden half-dreams and fell far short of the whole-dream she had anticipated.

Once she was gone and James had closed the books on his June fiscal clients, he faced again his lackadaisical game-playing. He stored the coffeepot, stocked up on health foods and bought a supply of multiple vitamins. He was sure he was sick during that long, hot, empty summer—but found he was not with Helen's return.

"How was your summer?" he asked her.

"Very pleasant," she said.

"And your father?"

"As well as can be expected."

It was the third fall after the third summer after the third spring of their marriage that Helen's answers seemed to be ruffled with smiles and sequined with laughter. There was nothing blatant about her attitude; that is, the ruffles were narrow and the sequins did not glitter, but she was different. Even James noticed, and had there been a man on the faculty staff of the school where she taught, he would surely have said, "the bud is in full bloom."

Their life and the seasons continued without change. Helen taught her fourth grade pupils while James continued his efficient accounting service. In the evenings he worked his problems while she tidied and sewed and remained in the background. Then later, occasionally, very occasionally, James' quick and labored breathing moved him to become passionately but precisely impulsive—so briefly that his impulse had about it a sub-

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liminal effect, as one might guess.

Each weekend Helen drove, ostensibly, to the nursing home fifty miles away and back again.

"How is your father getting along?" asked James.

She shrugged.

Late in that fourth spring, James asked Helen, "Are you sure your father can make that long trip this year?"

"Oh, absolutely," she said with immediate conviction, and began to pack.

The summer began hotter than usual. James closed all his June fiscal clients and faced the sticky emptiness of late July. He no longer had anything to sustain him, this man who, just four short years ago, had been immersed within, held close, mesmerized by the romance of numbers. He remembered with nostalgia his once-long evenings abridged by complex problems, his triumphs of solution, rewarded with coffee.

He remembered with nostalgia, and then with abrupt aversion. What man, he raged inwardly, would embrace paper figures when he could hold in his arms the warm and pulsing figure of a woman—*his* woman, he remembered, his by right of law.

Mrs. James . . . Didn't it say so on the mailbox?

It was then, at that moment, he made a momentous decision. He would claim her. He would ride, like Lochinvar, on his now seven-year-old wheels and snatch her for his own. If the old man should die with his arrival? *That was not cheating.*

James actually beat his chest with his fists at the thought.

It was not cheating now that she was his wife. His true wife, he amended, feeling a pulsating affection.

The clients he was to serve during that first week of August were mildly surprised when he informed them that their trial balances, their general ledgers, their profit-and-loss statements or whatever, must be held in abeyance until his return; as the service station attendants that serviced his car and had just serviced it, were surprised when he told them to service it again for his trip.

The trip was uneventful and he arrived at the lake during an afternoon of cool beauty. He parked his car and walked to the pier where there was a fish-bait house and a hamburger-soft drinks shack. He selected the fish-bait house and told the man there that he would like to find the Helinski cottage.

"Oh, yeah," said the man and turned to another. "That's the one on the other side, ain't it?".

"Helinski?"

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"Mr. Helinski," said James, "and his daughter."

"You'll find the daughter," said the second man, "but not old Helinski anymore."

"Not since last year," said the first.

"The year before that, wasn't it?" said the second. "I remember how it was. Joe took their supplies over to 'em and came back with the body."

"The body?" asked James.

"Helinski's body. The old man. Heart. Joe and the girl brought him back to the mainland."

"Yeah. Joe and the girl." The first man looked at the second and they shared a brief and communal smile.

"So if you want to find old Helinski, he's out at the cemetery," said the second man gravely, "but if you want to find the girl, she's over at the cottage, all right."

"I want to find the girl," said James.

"You got the outboard?" asked the first man.

"Joe's got it."

"That figures."

The two men found an outboard for James at last. They gunned the motor for him, showed him how to steer, pointed across the water in the general direction of the cottage.

"Think you can make it?" they asked him, trading more smiles.

"Yes," said James grimly, "I can make it."

He saw the auxiliary oars lying on the bottom of the boat and noted subconsciously, with the precise mind of a mathematician working out a problem, that they were heavy and substantially lethal weapons. "I can make it fine," he said.

It was a beautiful lake that the motor hummed across. James did not attend to its beauty, but then he had never attended to beauty, beauty being variable and inexact, as was emotion . . . fleeting; an illusory delusion.

He cut off his motor and slid up next to the outboard already in place along the green shore of the green lake. He hefted an oar and found his muscles straining with the weight. He had a moment's regret for not having exercised his body along with his mind, but the regret was only momentary for he believed that the mind was mightier than the body—and set out to prove his point.

The cottage was back among the trees and quiet; quiet and absorbed.

He, too, was quiet—and intently absorbed.

He had never seen her body before; not exposed and bare, and certainly not so completely occu-

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pied. It was very beautiful—but he did not attend to beauty, beauty being transient and undependable, as was emotion—an hallucination of the senses.

He brought the oar down, killing them both with one heavy blow.

They were so closely entwined, this Joe and Helen, that one blow was enough—but James was a mathematician and a mathematician leaves nothing to chance. He struck again and again and again, not so much with fury as with furious precision.

He left then, and left the oar, his weapon, knowing that he was just a stranger looking for Helen Helinski, swinging spinster to the lake people, known only to Joe, who was dead with her; knowing that he was not Helen's husband because she had been Mrs. James only on a mailbox and but dimly to elevator-neighbors who had nodded doubly for four years and who would nod now again but singly, without wonder, without interest; knowing that he was nonexistent at the school where Miss Helinski taught, and where Miss Helinski would soon be forgotten.

James took up his problems once again, and gave himself small coffee awards with their solution. He had solved, at last, the biggest problem of his life. His equation now read: Helen − Father + James = ½ Helen + James − ½ Father = ½ Helen + James + ½ Joe − ½ Father = 0 Helen + 0 Father + 0 Joe = James.

Here was a definite and conclusive solution; one answer, one irrevocable and accurate answer.

James James, that precise, narrow-shouldered man again lives his precise and narrow-bordered life, his days being occupied with the business of accounting and his evenings with the hobby of solving tricky arithmetical problems in game books.

Now and then he looks at his solution: 0 Helen = James, and there is a slight fluttering of regret, just a tremor of wishful thinking, but he quickly washes it down with a swallow of coffee, and opens up his arithmetic game book.

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It becomes clear that integrity and dishonesty may enjoy a particular affinity.

by Al Nussbaum

JASON FLETCHER was a liar—an imaginative, shameless, and sometimes entertaining liar.

If he had ever written his autobiography, it's almost certain it would have been a best seller. He had the high forehead we associate with intelligence; the graying temples we equate with wisdom; the lean, evenly tanned features that spell manliness; and the unnaturally perfect teeth that can only be the product of thousands of dollars paid to a talented dentist. His photo on the dust jacket would have been a powerful promotional asset.

The content of the book would have contributed to sales, also. Jason Fletcher would have revealed the names of hundreds of world leaders who have depended upon him for advice. He would have detailed travels far more hazardous than those of Marco Polo, Columbus, or the astronauts of Apollo Eleven. His list of accomplishments would have rivaled the genius of Einstein, the daring of New York City cab drivers, and the luck of Irish Sweepstakes winners.

The only truth his autobiography might possibly have contained is his name. There is a chance,

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hough only a slight one, that Jason Fletcher was his true name.

The old saying that it takes one to know one is valid here. I'm a liar, too; but there was a huge difference between us in degree if not in kind. I've been a liar all my life. I learned the art from some of the world's most colorful and inventive experts—men and women who lied almost every time their lips moved. Jason Fletcher wasn't in my league.

The first lies I mastered were the Plain Lies. These are the lies commonly found in obituaries and the type of lies lovers exchange. Because there is no intention really to fool anyone, all lies of consideration fall into this category. A Plain Lie—whistling at an ugly woman, for instance—is actually meant as a kindness.

On the other hand, Damned Lies are conceived with deception, confusion and misdirection as their goal. Damned Lies range from the equivocal policy statements of politicians to the alibis offered by captured criminals. As is the case with Plain Lies, Damned Lies are usually easily detected, though this isn't the liar's intention. The chief difference between Plain Lies and Damned Lies is that Damned Lies are always told to benefit the Damned Liar.

By far the most skillful liars are the Double-damned Liars like myself. We are the ones who have made lying an art. Ours are not spur-of-the-moment creations, nor are they detected very often. The Double-damned Lie is a careful blend of fact and fancy, often built up over a long period of time until even the liar himself has difficulty telling which parts are true and which parts are the truth of the imagination.

If someone simply tells you he went to school with the President of the United States, he may be telling the truth or he may be a Damned Liar; but here's how a Double-damned Liar might handle it: "Isn't it funny the way we borrow things and never return them?" he'll say. "I was cleaning out the attic this morning (he really was) and look at this old book I found (he really did)."

At this point he'll hand you a dog-eared old textbook and let you discover the inscription: *Stolen from Richard M. Nixon.* He won't tell you he wrote the inscription that morning, using tincture of iodine to produce the fading brown script. And when you remark that the name is the same as the President's, he'll exclaim: "By gosh, you're right! You know, I never connected little Dickie Nixon, who used to follow me around, and the President. Guess

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I'd better return the book to him."

It's careful preparation like this that makes it possible for a Double-damned Liar to finish a long, involved story, then smile and say: "You can believe that if you want to."

But besides great artistry of technique, the Double-damned Liar has something else going for him—Double-damned Liars have integrity. They use their skills to give their listeners the pleasure of an interesting story disguised as truth, and they do it without any thought of gain. Double-damned Liars make their livings in many ways, but never by prostituting their art.

However, quite often a Damned Liar will develop a flair for lying, but lack the humanitarian instinct of the Double-damned Liar. A Damned Liar of this caliber will invariably become a professional actor, a confidence swindler, or a fiction writer. Fiction writers are all Damned Liars.

Because of his self-centered reason for lying and the ease with which he is found out, a Damned Liar gives all liars a bad name. Just as bank robbers have a difficult time overcoming the stigma of the Dillingers in their profession, and bigamists all seem to walk in the shadow cast by Bluebeard, the Damned Liar has an effect on public thinking far out of proportion to his true worth.

That's why any liar worthy of the name, whether he tells Double-damned Lies or merely Plain ones, hates a Damned Liar; and that's why I hated Jason Fletcher. Jason Fletcher was that most foul of liars, a Damned Liar.

The first time I saw Jason Fletcher he was playing tennis at a Beverly Hills country club late one Saturday afternoon. I was standing nearby, telling a carefully constructed lie to one of the club's directors, when Fletcher's opponent complimented him on the speed and accuracy of his serve.

"Thank you," he said modestly. "It earned me a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. I defeated both Gonzales and Kramer, you know."

Fletcher probably felt safe with this spur-of-the-moment Damned Lie. The Olympics *does* award gold medals, it *was* held in Rome in 1960, and Gonzales and Kramer *are* two of the most famous names in tennis. Unfortunately for Jason Fletcher's feeble effort, tennis is *not* one of the Olympic games. But when this fact was brought to Fletcher's attention, he just smiled and said: "Tennis, anyone?"

It was obvious to me that such *savoir faire* could have been gained only from numerous other ex-

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posures. He had revealed himself as not only a Damned Liar, but a prolific one.

As Fletcher and a new opponent volleyed for serve, I nodded toward him and asked: "Who's that?"

"Jason Fletcher," the club director answered.

I smiled. "That's a good name for an actor."

"Oh, he's not an actor."

"Well, writer, then." I was certain I had Fletcher pegged.

"Wrong again," the director said. "He's a history professor. He'll be teaching history at U.C.L.A. when the fall semester starts."

That was crazy. He might possibly *write* history, but teach it? Never! That wasn't an occupation in which a Damned Liar could be successful.

I shifted the discussion back to the Double-damned Lie I had been telling, but kept my eye on Fletcher. Before long he finished playing and went to the locker room to shower and change. I kept the door under observation so he couldn't leave without my seeing him. When he emerged and went to the bar, I followed along behind him. The sun was beginning to set.

"There's a dance scheduled for tonight," the club director said, "but there probably won't be many people here—that's my feeling."

"Why's that?" I asked, making conversation. Jason Fletcher had picked up his drink from the bar and carried it to a small table near the windows. He had a view of the parking lot from there, but not much else.

"There's been an epidemic of burglaries in the last few months. Several of our club members suffered heavy losses. The rest are fairly reluctant to go out again until the man's captured."

So we talked about the effect of crime waves on the country club business and had several drinks. I managed to inject half a dozen Double-damned Lies into the conversation, spaced over the period of a couple of hours, and Jason Fletcher didn't leave my sight. My host offered to find me a dinner jacket somewhere if I wanted to go to the dance, but I told him not to bother.

At a few minutes after ten, Fletcher finished his last drink and left the bar. I said good night to the club director, told him I'd stop by again soon, and followed Fletcher into the parking lot. I watched him move down the line of cars, pausing now and then to shine a tiny beam of light into one of them; then he climbed behind the wheel of a blood-red XKE and drove from the lot.

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I followed at a safe distance in my car. In the next hour and a half I was a witness when Fletcher broke into two homes and an apartment. He had one of the most compact kits of burglar tools I had ever seen. Apparently, he had been watching the country club parking lot and spotting the cars of celebrities. When he shined his light into them later, it was to get the addresses from the registration cards attached to the steering columns. It was an old trick. Obviously, he gave his burglaries no more preparation than he gave his lies, but he was a bit more successful as a burglar. At least, no one caught him at it.

I followed him to his apartment and then went home myself. The next day the *Los Angeles Times* gave front-page space to the story about the burglaries. The police linked these last three crimes with the previous ones because a lock-picking machine, a small vibrating device, was apparently used to open the locked doors in all instances.

I stayed home, but kept my radio tuned to a station with good news coverage. At five in the afternoon it was announced that the police, acting on an anonymous tip, had obtained a warrant to search the apartment of Jason Fletcher. The loot from the last three burglaries was found, but nothing else. Under questioning, Fletcher produced airtight alibis for the times the earlier burglaries had been committed.

Now, because of my dislike for Damned Liars, I suppose you believe I'm the one who made the anonymous call to the police. You may also suspect that I know a bit too much about the techniques of burglars to be completely pure of heart. You're thinking I might even be the man responsible for that crime wave in Los Angeles.

Well, you are wrong. Much as I hated Jason Fletcher as a person, I could never have forced myself to inform on him to the police. I make it a strict rule never to involve myself in the affairs of others. The fact that he was a criminal made no difference. As for the idea of me being a burglar, it's ridiculous. The accusation is too insulting to merit a detailed defense; however I will make one unequivocal statement: I am a liar and a good one, but I have never burgled a house in my life.

You can believe me if you want to.

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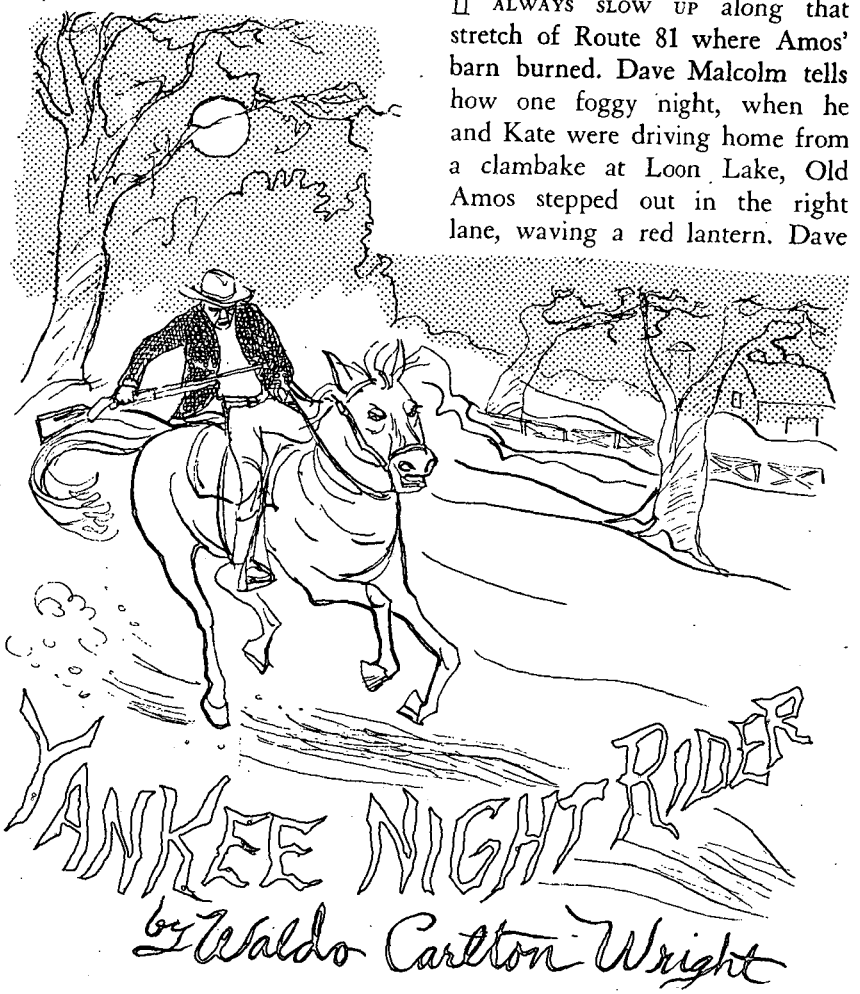
Ingenuity may surmount more obstacles than may seem possible.

I ALWAYS SLOW UP along that stretch of Route 81 where Amos' barn burned. Dave Malcolm tells how one foggy night, when he and Kate were driving home from a clambake at Loon Lake, Old Amos stepped out in the right lane, waving a red lantern. Dave



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swung his car hard to the left, missed him.

Dave probably had one too many for the road that night, for he had just helped bury what was left of the old Yankee after his barn and house burned.

Anyway, there have been some strange accidents where the new highway dips deep into Benton Valley, cutting through what was once a dahlia farm.

Amos was the last of a long line of Yankees. Shortly after the Revolution, his ancestors came across the Poconos, driving their ox carts from Connecticut. Ever since, these pioneers had been taking potshots at anyone who tried to drive them off the land they cleared of hemlock and oak.

When Amos' Matilda died, he acted stubborn as ever. First he dressed her in the black satin she wore to play the pipe organ in the Congregational church. Then he laid her in the smaller of two pine coffins he had stored in the loft of the old barn. He had built the coffins himself for what he knew would happen to both of them sooner or later. No kin was left.

He wouldn't let Clem Miller embalm Matilda, but he borrowed Clem's hearse. After the young preacher had read the service for the dead, four of us dairy farmers lifted the light coffin into the hearse. Then Old Amos climbed into the driver's seat.

"We Peabodys do for ourselves," he said. Nodding toward the young preacher, he flipped the whip across Dolly's rump and headed down the lane toward the family cemetery.

"That's the way he wants it, folks," Clem Miller announced. "Let's all go back to our milking."

That summer the indignation of the Ladies Aid over Matilda's indecent funeral faded, like the dahlias Old Amos put on the church altar every Sunday in memory of his wife.

My wife Elizabeth would bake a chicken casserole every Tuesday for the lonely old man. Jane Kovac had Pete leave an apple pie in the mailbox every Friday. Gradually, all the women took a hand trying to mother the lonely old man.

The year after Matilda died, state highway engineers mapped out the line for Route 81 through Benton Township. Dave and I got the job of appraising the stretch of farmland three hundred yards wide that would be taken over.

When Old Amos saw the survey crew heading through his frost-nipped dahlia field, he thought it was some of us neighbors hunting grouse. He didn't ever object to that. But when strangers set up a

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transit and began sighting near his house, he came out waving his squirrel rifle. The crew withdrew.

Tim Henderson, the sheriff of Bedford County, drove over to ask Amos to please let the surveyors run their line. Tim added that the new highway would benefit all of us.

"Sure, you dairy farmers want it. But it'll cut me off from my barn," Amos protested, "ruin my dahlia business."

Tim explained about eminent domain and how the state could take land it needed for better roads.

"Not through my dahlia field, it can't," Amos said, the corners of his thin nose white with pent-up anger. "Charles the Second gave us Yankees this land, my grandpappy told me."

Tim phoned me, asking Dave and me to drive over and tell Amos how much he would be paid for the land the state took. We did, but got no further than Tim had—even after we told Amos he would get three hundred dollars an acre for the forty-three acres. Surely a fair price for land that had only cost his folks seventy-five cents an acre in 1790.

" 'Tain't for sale, not to the state or anybody. You dairy farmers have whittled me down to my best acres. I'm not selling a square rod more, so no use asking me again."

Old Amos lifted his squirrel rifle off the wooden pegs over the fireplace, as a hint it might be healthier for us to take off.

"You know, that old Yankee's got a point," Dave admitted as he headed the pickup down the lane. "His farm won't be worth a wooden nickel. The surveyor told me they're planning a rock fill a hundred feet high between his house and barn."

Amos must have figured all of us were to blame for running the new highway right through his farm. It wasn't long before he began to show us that no one was going to take any more Peabody land.

I first heard of his night riding that afternoon. I drove over to Harry Erhardt's for a half ton of 10-5-5 fertilizer for the back ridge. I felt Harry had something on his mind as he helped me stack the bags in my truck.

"Bill, I'm scared Old Amos is up to something," he blurted out, dusting his hands on his coveralls and heading back in to the office to make out the bill.

"He'll come around," I said. "What else can he do?"

Then Harry told me about the night riding. He had been unloading a car of fertilizer from the Bedford siding Saturday afternoon

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to avoid demurrage. It was dusk before he lugged the last fifty bags onto his truck.

Just as he was heading up the hollow road, he heard a shot from the woods. Something glanced off the hood of his truck.

Harry hasn't fancied being shot at ever since the Battle of the Bulge, when his platoon was pinned down for three days in a cellar. He jammed the gas pedal to the floor, tailing it for Benton. Through the side mirror he saw Old Amos in his floppy hat racing after him on his white mare.

"How can you be sure it wasn't some Halloween joker made up like Old Amos and having some fun?"

"Amos owns the only pure white horse in Bedford County," Harry said, jotting down the charge in his ledger. "I figure he blames all of us for putting this highway through his place."

Fortunately for most of us dairy farmers, the highway engineers decided at this time that they would establish a cloverleaf in the valley. But not so good for Amos. The exits to Rush and Exeter would run right smack where Amos' barn and house had stood for over a hundred years.

When one of the young adjusters called on Amos to tell him the state would build him a new house and barn, the old man grinned, offered the adjuster a glass of hard cider. He seemed to think this meant that the highway wasn't going through that way at all.

The morning the first bulldozers moved into his meadow, Amos rode in to Bedford to protest to Judge Trethaway. The judge took Amos into his chambers and showed him in one of his law books what it said about eminent domain.

"You're in this with the dairy farmers," Amos said. "Your kind tried to drive us Yankees away when we first settled here right after the Revolution. I'm not moving."

It was the next week that McDevitt's barn caught fire, burned to the ground. George had just cut the last of the corn, filled the wooden silos and hoisted the last of the dry alfalfa into the loft. This and twenty of his prize Hereford calves went up in smoke.

"Does George suspect Old Amos set the fire in the granary?" I asked Dave. He had just brought back the hundred foot of hose the Bedford firemen had borrowed.

"George spotted him on his white mare riding along the upper road earlier that evening." Dave helped me hang up the hose in the milk shed. "I tell you, Bill, the old man's plumb dangerous. Your

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barn or mine could burn up next."

Most of us farmers felt it was up to Sheriff Henderson to do something, and pronto.

"I got to have me a warrant," Tim Henderson protested. "Just because a man rides around the countryside at night, you can't arrest him for that."

"Then I'm charging him with arson, burning my barn and my prize calves," George McDevitt said.

Henderson was still reluctant. He finally decided he would need about ten deputies to take Amos in to the county jail, for trial. We were to meet at his place Thursday night, after supper.

Elizabeth was set against my getting into this. She kept saying that, after all, we have been neighbors of the Peabodys ever since we bought the hundred acres upland from him for our dairy farm. To tell the truth, I hadn't much stomach for it either—but something had to be done.

Seven of us rode over to Henderson's that night. Tim invited us in for a drink. He had already sent two men over to watch Old Amos' house, check if he was home. If they saw him ride out, they were to send up a flare, point it in the direction he took. Otherwise we would move in to take him there.

We sat in the dark with our feet up on the porch rail, smoking, the way every Benton farmer stalls for time, postponing a messy job like hauling manure or shooting one of his best milk cows that shows a positive reaction to the vet's test for foot-and-mouth disease.

"I think I spotted him snooping around my place last night." Pete Kovac slapped a mosquito on his wrist.

"Looking for a letter you lost?" Tim was always kibitzing Pete about leaving the mail in the wrong box.

"No," Pete said, rubbing where the mosquito had stung his wrist. "My German shepherd got me awake, barking. I went to the bedroom window. Old Amos on the white mare was tailing it off down the lane."

The grandfather clock in the livingroom bonged nine times. Then a white spire shot up in the evening sky, and bent over like a wilted leaf in a shower of sparks, toward the ridge.

"He's gotten wind of our plan." The sheriff pushed back his chair, gave a hitch to his belt and patted his holster. "Let's go, men."

"Which road do you suppose he took?" Dave asked, picking up the carbine he had laid on the floor by his chair.

"You all know there's only two

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ways he can go east," I said. "Down the Benton road or over the ridge by my place."

"Probably heading for my barn again," Pete Kovac said.

"Look, you guys," Dave said, "remember this old Yankee is sick. Go easy with him."

"No crazier than I am," George McDevitt said. He had received his insurance check and was rebuilding a bigger, more modern barn of the quonset type. "He just blames all of us for taking his land."

"Let's get on with it." The sheriff headed down the steps toward the hitching post. "Once we bring him in, Doc Hetrick can find out soon enough whether he's off his rocker."

We swung into our saddles, set off in two parties. Dave and I were to head along the ridge. It was the unlikely route Old Amos would take. The rest of the posse set off for the Benton crossroads.

"Let's shortcut across Henderson's fields." Dave swung his roan horse to the right, jogging through the corn stubble. Amos could have holed up in any of the tentlike corn shocks, to pick us off.

My saddle mare, White Star, followed the furrows. Where hunters had pulled down the old stone fence to dig out a fox, Dave headed through to the Warrior Trail. It had once been cleared for a wagon road, but now was just wide enough for horse and rider.

As we headed up the zigzag path, branches of the second growth brushed my face, dragged at my arms, as if warning me to turn back. Moonlight filtered through the giant hemlock.

Dave's roan knew every bend of the old trail, padding through the pine needles. I hadn't ridden White Star for a month. Soon she was sweating to keep up. Except for the creaking leather of saddle girth and hooves swishing over slippery pine needles, the woods seemed to be holding its breath, waiting.

It grew lighter as we neared the escarpment. Then all at once I felt someone was watching us. The back of my neck froze as I made out an upright figure on a white horse in a laurel thicket. Moonlight glanced off the barrel of a long rifle, laying across the pommel of a Western saddle.

Even as I spotted Old Amos, he swung the rifle to his shoulder.

"Dave," I called, "look out."

In that same instant the shell exploded. I heard the bullet ricochet off a boulder, go whirring into the laurel. Before I could swing White Star to head him off, Old Amos dug his spurs into Dolly's ribs, was off down the trail.

Dave wheeled back. "Are you

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hurt?" he called out anxiously.

"Just scared," I admitted.

"Then come on."

I couldn't keep up in the mad chase down the trail. Twice I heard shots, but wasn't sure which man was firing.

White Star refused to gallop. She picked her way down the trail, more like a mountain goat than a Kentucky walker. Probably it was just as well, for if she had stumbled in a wagon rut, we might both have found ourselves rolling down the cliff.

Dave was waiting at the break in the stone fence at the cornfield.

"That mare of his sure can skedaddle." He was leaning over wiping the white foam from the roan's neck. "The old devil put a hole through my hat."

"We better tail it for the crossroads," I said. "He would have to head that way to get back to his barn."

At the crossroads Sheriff Henderson and the rest of the posse were waiting for us, manning a roadblock in the bright moonlight. Dave told of our brush with Old Amos.

"He was probably expecting me up there," McDevitt said, "waiting to pick me off the way he burned my barn, damn his hide."

"Somehow he gave us the slip," the sheriff said. "Probably headed back to his barn. Waiting for another night."

"He blew a hole through my hat," Dave admitted. He ran a finger through the hole, staring at it in disbelief.

"Maybe the men that sent up the rocket saw him turn back," I suggested.

At the schoolhouse where the road curves down from the Hollow, the sheriff reined in, raised one arm to halt us. Across the stake and rider fence, a body lay near a parked bulldozer.

It was Andy Lucas, one of the scouts who had sent up the rocket flare. A soft-nosed bullet had ripped a hole the size of my fist in his chest.

"One of us had better ride around back of the barn, see if Old Amos is in there." The sheriff rubbed his sleeve across his brow.

"I'll slip along the creek, come up back," Pete Kovac, the mailman, said. "He just missed burning my barn tonight."

Kovac cantered across the pasture, disappeared along the bank of the creek, behind the willows. A minute later, his horse mounted the bank, with Kovac crouched low in the saddle. Just when I thought he had put Old Amos' barn between him and the house, there was a flash from the barn loft. Kovac leaned farther forward,

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as if the veteran mailman was suddenly too tired ever to deliver another letter. Then he toppled into the milkweed stalks. His horse bolted down the creek bed, heading toward Bedford.

"Plain enough Amos was holed in," the sheriff said. "Tie your mounts. We got to move in on foot, commando-like."

"Bill and I will ride around back," Dave volunteered, "in case he makes a break for the hill."

"Look alive," Henderson warned. "He's a crack shot with that old rifle."

Dave and I rode farther down the road, beyond the pasture, then moved through the woods to the creek bed. I knew Old Amos couldn't spot us, as long as we stayed under the bank of the dry creek bed.

At the edge of the dahlia field, we tied our horses to saplings. Then, crouching low, we followed the bank to opposite the barn. By now I could hear Old Amos firing from the loft.

Once over the bank we found the going rough, crawling through the dried stalks of the dahlias, moving in closer to the old barn.

Suddenly I heard the sheriff calling through the bullhorn.

"Amos, this is Sheriff Henderson. Come out, hands up."

"Get off my property, you land-grabbers," came the quavering voice from the old man. "Or you'll pay in blood."

"Amos, listen to me," the sheriff called. "You're a sick man. Come out. Let us take you to a hospital."

For a full minute all was silence, except for the chirping of the crickets in the weeds.

"He's stopped firing, at least," Dave whispered. "Maybe he's decided to come out, peaceful-like."

"Look," I pointed to the ridgepole of the barn. "Do you see what I see?"

A blue wisp of smoke was rising from the top of the old barn, drawing a wavy streak across the face of the full moon.

"Great balls of fire," Dave said, more to himself. "The crazy fool's burning his own barn."

Dave took off on the double, heading for the entry door to the stalls. Inside the barn I could hear the old mare whinnying. In the lean-to shed, Dave grabbed a burlap sack, wound it around his head and shoulders.

"You can't go in there," I shouted.

"I've got to," he yelled back. "He'll burn."

He yanked open the entry door. Black-red flame lapped out. Dave jumped back.

Sheriff Henderson had spotted us, came running. But before the

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first bucket brigade could tote a pailful from the pump, the whole front of the barn slid down like a loose curtain. The dried hay exploded with a roar. Soon the interior of the barn became a giant torch, its heat driving us back. I watched the threshing floor collapse, and heard the death whinny as Dolly was pinned in her stall. In the billowing smoke, no one saw hide or hair of Old Amos.

Soon the hickory pins that held the frame of the old barn burned through. The other walls collapsed. Flaming shingles voluted high in the air. Some landed on the roof of the old house.

Someone had spotted the glow in the night sky as far away as Bedford, but before the pumping engine could reach the farm, both barn and house were twisted, smoldering timbers. The house that Amos' great-great-grandfather had built here to replace the pioneer log cabin sank into the drystone foundation.

The next day Clem Miller, the undertaker, raked through the ashes until he uncovered Old Amos' leg bones and charred skull. These Clem buried in one of his own coffins. The one Amos had built for himself had gone up in smoke. The young preacher read the service of burial of the dead right and proper at the grave we dug for Amos in the family cemetery, beside Matilda.

The next spring, when they were pouring the cement for the east lane, someone discovered that the old cemetery had been buried under a hundred feet of rock fill. No one thought to complain to the highway department.

That's why, on foggy nights, I always slow down over that section of Route 81. I've never seen Old Amos' ghost, the way Dave claimed he did the night he was driving back from Loon Lake.

But every now and then, on a foggy night, some stranger drives off the road here and is found the next morning, dead in his overturned car, right where Amos' Yankee ancestors laid up the timbers for a house and barn.

With Yankee stubbornness, Old Amos had opposed our taking away his last acres. At last, in desperation, he had destroyed his property and himself—but at a price in blood he warned us he'd continue to collect. I guess Yankees don't take kindly to being done out of things, especially their last acres.

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Many are the reasons for an accident—and murder is one of them.

AT TWELVE-FIFTEEN that night the car was placed on the dark grade crossing in Valley View, population 2534. Two minutes later the engineer of Number 57, the fast freight, spotted the obstruction in his headlight's gleam. He blasted the diesel's horn, then snapped the air release.

"Watch it!" he shouted to his fireman, staring at the man behind the wheel of the car. With brake shoes screeching, the train crashed, mangling and scattering parts of automobile and human body for a third of a mile.

A few blocks away on the southwest side of town the ringing telephone awakened McCabe, chief of the three-man police department. The hurried call was from Donovan, one of his regular patrolmen, reporting the crash and needing help at the scene.

McCabe phoned the elderly woman who baby-sat his three motherless children, pulled on his uniform and hurried out to his official station wagon. On the way to the grade crossing he heard radio traffic, ordering county and state units to assist. They were

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needed, he saw upon arrival, for despite the hour a crowd had gathered and some were seeking grisly souvenirs, broken and twisted metal, a bit of bloody bone. McCabe spoke briefly to a highway patrolman.

by Carl Henry Rathjen

"Thanks for coming in. When you're getting them off the right-of-way on this side, see if you can locate any eyewitnesses for me."

Hurrying along the cinders, ordering people back, he made his way toward Donovan near the head end of the motionless freight. He reached Donovan as the patrolman played his light under a boxcar. McCabe saw a leg stripped of clothing.

Donovan grimaced. "Left one," he muttered. "The right one's down the line. So that's one person at least. I've been counting parts, trying to figure how many people might have been in the car."

"Maybe the train crew saw," McCabe began.

Donovan shook his head. "I haven't been able to question them yet. They began puking when they started back, looking under. I don't blame them."

"Maybe they should be blamed," someone said. Turning toward the voice, McCabe saw Harry Randell, a wiry local realtor whose sport jacket and cream felt hat looked as though they'd been carefully brushed. Randell looked coldly at

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McCabe. "I've been saying for a long time these trains come through here too fast."

McCabe's gray gaze went to his wristwatch. "I'd say it was right on the dot of the new *slower* schedule."

Randell shifted the direction of his criticism. "Someone said there were beer cans scattered among the wreckage. Probably a drunk driver whom you should have gotten."

McCabe answered evenly. "If that should be the cause, too bad we didn't see him in time to prevent an unfortunate situation."

"Like the one we prevented the other night," Donovan added.

Randell gave them both an icy look and turned away.

"Maybe," Donovan murmured, "I shouldn't have brought that up."

"It didn't help public relations," McCabe said mildly.

Two days ago Randell, arriving home from a trip to Hawaii, had been quite put out to learn that McCabe and Donovan, on the signed complaint of a neighbor, had raided his home because Randell's twenty-three-year-old son had been staging a beer party for high school and college kids, mostly underage.

McCabe, turning toward the head end of the freight, shrugged. "We don't do enough when the law applies to the other guy, too much when it's close to home. Keep on with what you were doing. I'll see if the engineer can tell me anything now."

The engineer's face was grayish-green. "All I saw was the driver. His window was open. No, I couldn't tell whether there was anyone beside him or in the back. At least I didn't see any movement like people trying to get out in panic."

"*He* wasn't trying to get out, either," said the fireman, gagging slightly. "As far as I could see, he wasn't even trying to get the car moving or anything. Just sat there, didn't even look at us with the light blazing at him, the horn blasting, the brakes screeching. He must have been passed out. Drunk, heart attack, or . . . or hurt."

"Hurt?" McCabe questioned. "Why do you suggest that?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have," the fireman said. "But I saw something dark down the side of his face. At that instant I thought it was blood, but maybe it was a shadow."

"A shadow from what?" McCabe asked. He spoke to the engineer. "You said the window was open. Was there any upholstery or weather stripping hanging down?"

"I dunno, Chief. But one thing's

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for sure, you ain't going to be able to ask him."

McCabe got their names, the conductor's, and other pertinent details. By the time he finished with them, the medical examiner had arrived and departed, giving his okay for Parker, the mortuary man, to forage under the train with the canvas body bag.

Donovan approached, carrying a remnant of coat. "His wallet and identification were in this, Mac. His name is . . . was Jerald Bramley."

"Former city attorney," McCabe said. That negated the beer cans. Bramley was a teetotaler. McCabe also recalled that the Bramleys had been to Hawaii with the Randells. He peered along the railroad right-of-way, but didn't see Randell.

"Mac." It was a sheriff's deputy, climbing over the coupling between boxcars. He carried something wrapped in newspaper. "The mortuary man said this might interest you."

The train crew moved curiously forward with McCabe, then drew back hurriedly from the sight of a hand and forearm in the paper. The wrist bore an expensive watch with a smashed crystal. McCabe put his light on it. The hands were jammed at 11:45. He looked over his shoulder at the engineer, but there was no need of asking again. The train had been on schedule into Valley View at 12:17. McCabe frowned at the dead man's watch, showing all of thirty minutes' difference. McCabe exchanged a glance with Donovan.

"Get this cleaned up here so the train can be on its way. I'm going to Bramley's."

It was a new colonial with tall white pillars. Lights shone softly through drawn drapes. As McCabe's tires crunched on the gravel drive, coach lights came on by the front door. Petite Katharine Bramley, in green stretch pants and matching blouse, rushed out, then stopped abruptly.

"Oh! Hello, Mac." She sounded flustered. "What brings you here?" When McCabe asked if they could step into the house first, her dark eyes looked enormous in her small face. "What is it, Mac?"

Inside, he tried to break it gently, then waited uncomfortably while she sobbed and huddled on a settee before the fireplace. Her streaked face lifted suddenly.

"It wasn't . . . suicide?"

"No," McCabe said, frowning. "What reason might he have had?" She just sobbed. He waited a few moments more. "I hate to bother you at a time like this, Mrs. Bramley, but there are some things it is important for me to know. Did your husband have a business

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appointment this evening?" She shook her head. "Where did he go?"

"I . . . don't know."

"What time did he leave?"

She was very busy wiping her eyes. "Late. After eleven."

Going out that late, McCabe thought, a man like Jerald Bramley would give his wife some inkling. Then he recalled how she had rushed out of the house, and her question about suicide.

"Did you and he have a spat? Is that why he went out?"

He let the questions dangle. A clock chimed once. Mrs. Bramley finally nodded slightly, without looking up.

"What did you quarrel about?" McCabe inquired.

"Just . . . a domestic difference." Color crept up her neck. "It needn't be your concern."

"What was it about?" McCabe persisted.

"Just a silly, childish attitude on my part . . . about something that . . . happened in Hawaii."

She wouldn't tell him anymore, except that she should not have jumped to conclusions after all the years of knowing that Jerry never drank, gambled, or chased other women.

"So," McCabe said resignedly, "you stayed up, waiting for him. When he went out, you didn't follow him to see where he went?"

"No. Why do you ask that?"

"Because," he said gently, but with an undertone of grimness, "I have reason to believe your husband was murdered."

"Oh, no!" Her eyes became larger, frightened. "You don't think that I—"

"You quarreled with him, Mrs. Bramley. Why?"

She stood up, facing him. "I told you—it has no bearing. And if I had killed him—which I *didn't*—then why would I have rushed out to welcome him back?" She sensed the question he was debating. "Don't you dare ask me if I were expecting someone else!"

He offered to call Mrs. Randell for her, or some other friend or relative. Sobbing, she shook her head.

He drove a few short blocks. Most houses were dark, but lights were on at the Randell ranch-style home. He swung over abruptly and went to the door. It was answered by the son, Barry Randell, whose thin pale features tightened at sight of McCabe.

"So it's you again. I thought we settled everything about that party you broke up the other night."

"I hope we did," said McCabe, wondering about the strong smell of spray deodorant. "I didn't come here about that. Are your mother

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and father in, or are you alone?"

"She's on the phone."

"I'll wait," said McCabe, but he wasn't invited in.

In a few moments plump Mrs. Randell came hurrying, tying a scarf about her head. "Whatever it is, can it wait until tomorrow?" she cried to McCabe. She wore a drab brown housedress which made her lumpy figure look sacky. "I have to hurry over to Kathy

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Bramley's. She just phoned me the most horrible news."

McCabe nodded. "About Jerald Bramley. May I have just a moment, Mrs. Randell?" He glanced at her son. "Privately."

Barry Randell sneered. "Nothing's private in this town."

His mother sighed. "I'm sure that complaint the other night was a mistake. Anyway you should be glad, Barry, that people and the police are anxious to protect you from bad influences."

"Oh, for cripes sake, let's not have those platitudes again!" He gave McCabe a hard look and sauntered away.

Mrs. Randell smiled tautly. "He's really a good boy, Chief. It's just that some of the company he's taken up with lately—"

"I met them," McCabe remarked, and felt like asking her who was influencing whom, but that was another matter at the moment. "I'll be very blunt so you can be on your way, Mrs. Randell. On the trip to Hawaii, what caused the rift between the Bramleys?"

Her face tightened again. "Whatever on earth gave you—"

"If Mrs. Bramley didn't tell you on the phone just now," he said, noting a sudden tinge of embarrassment, "I believe that Jerald Bramley was murdered tonight."

"And," she retorted, "you're trying to say that Kathy might have—"

"I haven't said that," McCabe corrected her. "But when there are unanswered questions . . ."

She glanced back in the house, then stepped outside, closing the door.

"Please don't breathe a word of this to anyone." She lowered her voice. "Kathy told me in confidence that she caught Jerry coming from the room of a very flirtatious divorcee in the hotel at Waikiki. He denied anything improper, said it was a confidential business matter. On his vacation? She couldn't believe that. They've both been miserable ever since. I've been telling her he's not that kind of a husband, and I'm sure she'll forgive him, if she hasn't done it already." Mrs. Randell nodded. "So it's absurd for you to have any thought that she might have killed—" McCabe saw her face blanch abruptly. "Or did you come here to ask questions about my—for some other reason?"

"Such as your husband?" McCabe asked quickly. "I saw him at the scene. What was he supposed to be doing tonight?"

She looked past him. He blocked her way. "That's an absurd thought, too. He and Jerry Bramley were best friends."

"Then why are you reluctant to answer my question?" McCabe

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asked. "Where did your husband go tonight?"

She hesitated, then spoke with rapid finality. "He got a phone call from Jerry late this evening. I don't know what about. He just said it was Jerry, got dressed, and left."

"Late this evening. Just what time, Mrs. Randell?"

"About . . . ten minutes past eleven-thirty."

Very close to eleven forty-five, the time that Bramley's watch had been smashed, McCabe thought. He let the realtor's wife hurry off to Kathy Bramley. Driving around the corner he stopped to radio Donovan, who had nothing new to report. Then a car, accelerating rapidly, crossed the intersection behind McCabe. Turning, he got a glimpse and was certain it was young Randell's. He'd often stopped it for traffic violations.

McCabe U-turned quickly and swung around the corner. Two blocks ahead he saw taillights turning south on Main Street. When he reached that corner they weren't in sight. He radioed Donovan again, ordering him to the south end of town.

"Don't intercept, just tail him."

They met at the south end. Donovan shook his head. McCabe rapidly backtracked northward and whipped off Main Street to the Randell Realty office. Except for the night light, it was dark. An alley cat slunk across the adjacent deserted parking area.

McCabe drove to Parker's Restful Sanctuary and rang the night bell. The mortician shook his prematurely bald head.

"I thought I was toughened, Mac, but I can do without another one like tonight's."

"Second the motion," said McCabe. "I've been wondering if I should ask the medical examiner to give everything another check—particularly on the head." The mortician stared. "One of the train crew," McCabe explained, "thought he might have seen signs of blood before the crash."

"And plenty more was spilled and cranial bones were battered. So who can find anything now?" Parker shrugged, sighing. "But wait. I didn't give anything a close look because there's nothing I can do except make it a closed casket affair. Want to take a look with me?"

McCabe hesitated, then followed him.

Twenty minutes later McCabe used the phone in the mortuary office. He spoke to the medical examiner.

"We found tiny particles of brick, possibly red brick, imbedded in a gash by the left temple. The

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injury is severe enough to have caused death if it happened *before* the crash."

The medical examiner said, "Hm!" Then he remarked there could have been some broken brick on the right-of-way, also. However, he'd hold his report open on the cause of death, pending further investigation in an effort to pinpoint the time to 11:45 p.m. or 12:17 a.m.

McCabe said wryly, "I have a feeling it's going to be my job to decide on either end of that half-hour."

"Good luck, Mac," said the M.E., hanging up.

Closing up, Parker accompanied McCabe outside.

"Thanks, Mac, for breaking up that party a few nights ago." He caught McCabe's questioning look. "My daughter was there, but left before you arrived. She had a date whom I didn't approve of, but you know how it is if you sound off too hard. Anyway, when she saw what she was getting into, she feigned illness and made him bring her home. He phoned tonight, wanting to take her to another party, but she turned him down. Made me feel good as a parent that she did it on her own."

McCabe nodded, recalling that, though the hour had been late a little while ago, young Barry Randell had still been up, then had gone out again.

"Where was this party?"

"I don't know, Mac, or even if it took place. My daughter's would-be date called her 'chicken' when she turned him down. She got the impression that most of the other young people from the other night weren't going to attend, either. They probably had some sense scared into them by your raid."

"Good, I hope it lasts," said McCabe.

He radioed Donovan again, but the patrolman hadn't noticed any collection of cars or signs of a party. McCabe thought about the thirty minutes he had to justify. He drove past the Randell house. It was dark. He went on the short distance to the Bramleys'. There were lights on, and Harry Randell's car and his wife's bug were parked in the drive. McCabe frowned at his watch, going on four a.m. Then he saw Harry Randell step outside to light a cigar. McCabe got out and started up the walk.

Randell glowered. "Do you have to bother her again?"

"It's you I want to see," McCabe said.

"What about?"

"Why did you see Jerald Bramley just before he died?"

Randell's nostrils snorted cigar

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smoke. "I didn't see him and I didn't know he was going to die."

"He phoned you and you went out to see him," McCabe said. "You were at the railroad crossing. You must have heard in the crowd that the victim had been identified as your best friend. Yet you did not phone or come to stand by his wife in her sorrow while I was here earlier. Nor did you appear at or phone your own home."

"You just said it," Randell snapped. "He was my best friend. I'd just come home from a trip I'd shared with him. I was badly shaken by his death. I went to my office. I . . . I just sat there . . . pulling myself together."

McCabe couldn't imagine Harry Randell coming apart. Not that piece of ice. "What kind of trouble," he asked suddenly, "did you and Bramley get into on the Hawaiian trip?"

"What business is that of yours? It's out of your bailiwick."

"But the people involved are now *in* my bailiwick," McCabe countered. "And one of them is dead. Murdered. So what about Hawaii?"

The realtor shook his head sadly. "Man, you're fishing, aren't you?"

McCabe nodded. "Sometimes police work is like that. Usually we deal only with facts, not gossip. But we can't avoid hearing gossip either, and I've heard plenty about you over the years which apparently has never reached your wife's years."

"Now what the hell, you going in for blackmail?" Randell demanded. His eyes failed to match his angry tone, and they flicked at the door to make certain it was closed.

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"Not blackmail from me, Mr. Randell, though I think it was attempted on you by a very flirtatious-appearing divorcee at Waikiki." He could tell his fishing had hooked deeply. He went on with more confidence. "But your best friend, Jerald Bramley, a lawyer, went to your rescue by seeing her and warning her off. Unfortunately his wife became aware of that visit. But he kept silent, still protecting you at the risk of his own married happiness. That rift with his wife caused him to leave his home tonight. Then he called you to meet him. You went out just before eleven forty-five, the actual time that he was killed."

"I told you I didn't see him."

"Why did he want to see you?"

"It had nothing to do with Hawaii."

"What else then?" McCabe insisted.

Randell's face was as rigid as ice. "I told you I didn't see him. Try to prove that I did." Turning, he went into the house.

McCabe went home to bed, but sleep eluded him. It was as though he were at the railroad crossing again. He had a collection of fragmented clues. Tossing in bed, he tried to rebuild them . . .

Bramley had undoubtedly prevented blackmail from the divorcee in Hawaii. Had he then decided to try it himself, calling Randell out tonight to press his demands? No, not Bramley.

Then there was the rift between the Bramleys. Maybe, before leaving the house, Bramley had hinted the truth to his wife in an effort to save their marriage. He wouldn't necessarily have had to reveal that to Randell, for it was just between him and Kathy Bramley. But suppose Kathy had let it slip to Mrs. Randell, who seemed never to have an inkling of her husband's goings-on, or her son's for that matter? Then again, maybe Mrs. Randell was aware and, like some wives, preferred to take a closed-eye attitude for the security of her marriage. Anyway, why would Mrs. Randell kill Bramley rather than her husband?

Another fragment that wouldn't fit with the others: obviously Bramley hadn't been killed at the railroad crossing. That meant he had to be lifted into the car and taken to the railroad, then his inert form had to be placed behind the wheel. McCabe doubted if either of the women were capable of that physical effort.

Fragments. Did he have all of them? Or were some beyond his reach, like souvenirs picked up at the crossing? McCabe tried to sleep, but gave up when dawn began poking fingers into the shad-

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ows of the night. He shaved, showered, made coffee and got in the morning paper from Allentown. The front page had a photo and three-column headlines about Bramley's death, more photos on Page 3, and a portrait and obituary on the vital statistics page. The main story, carefully avoiding the word "murder," hinted at the mysterious circumstances involved.

The phone rang as McCabe was making breakfast for his three children.

"Mac? Jake Dorsey. Hope I didn't get you up."

"No, Jake. What can I do for you?" McCabe prayed it wasn't a report of a break-in at Dorsey's drive-in, something that would diffuse his attention because, being a small town chief, he lacked manpower and had to be and do almost all things himself.

"When I opened up," Dorsey said, "I only had a glance at the headlines because I had to get ready for breakfasts. But now that I've read more . . . I got something I can tell you about Jerry Bramley last night."

McCabe suddenly felt no lack of sleep. Thank God for people who didn't want to hang onto their "souvenirs," who were willing to become involved by cooperating with the police.

"Hold it a moment, Jake." Turning, McCabe called to his daughter, a junior high student, to hurry dressing and take care of the breakfasts. "Okay, Jake, what is it?"

Five minutes later, after a phone call to the home of Parker, the mortician, he hurried out to his car. A little later, in the one-room station in city hall, he made some more phone and radio calls, then drove to Randell's office, arriving just ahead of the realtor.

"Thanks for coming down," McCabe greeted him.

"Why not?" Coldly. "I've got nothing to hide."

"Fine," said McCabe. "Let's go in your office a moment."

Puzzled, Randell unlocked the door. "Well?" he demanded.

McCabe gestured toward a panel of tagged keys on hooks. "We'll want the key to the house where the Bramleys used to live."

Randell's manner became wary. "It . . . it's not—"

"It must be here," said McCabe, moving to the panel. "You're the agent to sell or rent the place for him. It's a very distinctive key. I saw it many times when Bramley was city attorney. Here it is."

Randell stared at it.

McCabe nodded toward the door. "We'll go in my car."

The old house on the east side of town, not too far from the railroad

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crossing, had a musty odor like all unoccupied places. There was also a smell like burnt rope. Ignoring it for the moment, McCabe went directly to the raised hearth of the fireplace. It was red brick, and the corner of an end brick was slightly chipped and stained. McCabe faced Randell.

"There's where your best friend died last night."

Randell spoke tensely. "How . . . did you know it was here?"

"I could ask you that same question," McCabe said bleakly. "But to save time and prevent your evasions, I'll answer it for you. Bramley drove by here last night, cooling off from the spat with his wife. Recalling happier times, he must have strolled around back and saw a car parked there. He went down the street to Jake Dorsey's, from where Bramley phoned you. Jake heard him. You obviously told Bramley the place was still unoccupied. He asked you to come down here and see for yourself. He must have gotten tired of waiting for you—"

"I was just turning in while my wife watched the late show," Randell muttered, scowling at the fireplace. "I had to get dressed."

McCabe nodded. The fragments were rebuilding. "So Bramley drove back here and confronted the unauthorized occupants. I figure there were two of them. He probably became very angry when he spotted those . . ." McCabe waved toward a litter of beer cans to one side, ". . . and also because, as a former city attorney, he recognized the burnt rope odor of marijuana. Either he was going to make a citizen's arrest or was going to leave to get me. Instead, they roughed him up, knocked him down, and he was killed when his head struck the corner of the raised hearth. The fall also broke his watch at eleven forty-five."

Randell's face was becoming haggard. McCabe went on curtly.

"They lugged his body out to his car and took off with both cars. By the time you got here, there was nothing to see outside and you didn't have the key to get in. They were down at the railroad, waiting to put the car on the crossing. You were probably still in the neighborhood, wondering where Bramley was, when you heard the crash. You went there. Later, when Bramley had been identified and you learned about it, you began putting it all together. You went to your office, as you told me, but only to see if the key was there. Right?"

Randell didn't answer. McCabe's voice hardened.

"You were surprised when I

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found the key this morning. I should have had my hands on it last night. I wasn't thinking, or maybe I didn't have enough facts yet to go on, but I came very close to catching your son returning the key to your office."

The statement was no surprise to Randell. His head jerked up finally with cold defiance in his eyes.

"You can't prove any of this. I'll get him the best lawyer to—"

McCabe interrupted. "I got the name of your son's pal from Parker's daughter, who turned him down last night. I've already picked him up, and he's talked."

Outside the door there was a sudden scraping of feet. Then a commanding shout by Donovan and sounds of a scuffle. McCabe dashed out to find Donovan and two auxiliaries subduing and handcuffing Barry Randell. McCabe went inside to Randell.

"I thought he might give himself away by keeping tabs on the investigation. He must have listened in on the extension when I called you this morning. But we were keeping strict watch on him, too."

Randell just glared. McCabe sighed.

"Get your lawyer, Randell. But I promise you, when I back all this up with solid evidence for the D.A., it will be a tough case for any lawyer to beat. I doubt if even Jerald Bramley could have beaten it." He met the worried eye of the killer's father. "When you come right down to it, Randell, the time to have prevented this mess was with the flat of your hand when he was a child. But I suppose you left that to your indulgent wife—since you were too busy pursuing other interests."

McCabe went outside into the clean morning air.

"Take him to the station," he told Donovan. "I'll be there shortly."

He drove off to perform a bittersweet task. Bitter because, being a widower, he knew how it was for the widow of Jerald Bramley. But he could also reassure her about Hawaii, that her memories of her husband could be as sweet as those McCabe had of his wife.

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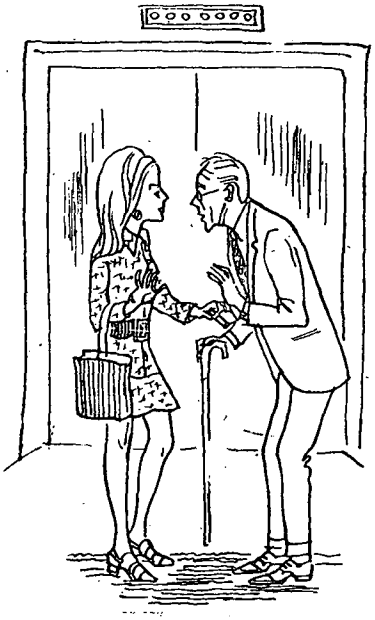
When the issue is decided, the yeas should have it.



A Dip in the POOLE

I WAS SITTING in a ponderously heavy baroque chair in the Hotel Poole's genteel lobby, leafing through one of the plastic-encased magazines provided by the management, when the girl in the dark tweed suit picked Andrew J. Stuyvesant's pockets.

She worked it very nicely. Stuyvesant—a silver-haired old gentleman who carried a malacca walking stick and had fifteen or twenty million dollars in Texas oil—had just stepped out of one of the chrome-and-walnut elevators directly in front of me. The girl appeared from the direction of the curving marble staircase, walking rapidly and with elaborate preoccupation, and collided forcefully with him. She excused herself, dimpling prettily. Bowing in a gallant way, Stuyvesant allowed as how it was perfectly all right, my dear. She got his wallet and the diamond stickpin from his tie, and he neither felt nor suspected a thing.

The girl apologized again and then hurried off across the thickly

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padded indigo carpeting toward the main entrance at the lobby's opposite end, deftly slipping the items into a tan suede bag she carried over one arm. Almost immediately, I was out of my chair and moving quickly but unobtrusively after her. She managed to thread her way through the potted plants and the multitude of dark furnishings to within a few steps of the double-glass doors before I caught up with her.

I let my hand fall on her arm. "Excuse me just a moment," I said, smiling.

She stiffened, becoming completely still. Then she turned and regarded me as if I had crawled out from one of the potted plants. "I beg your pardon?" she said in a frosty voice.

"You and I had best have a little chat."

"I am not in the habit of chatting with strange men."

"I think you'll make an exception in my case."

Her brown eyes flashed angrily as she said, "I suggest you let go of my arm. If you don't, I shall call the manager."

I shrugged lightly. "There's no need for that."

"I certainly hope not."

"Simply because he would only call me."

"What?"

"I'm chief of security at the Hotel Poole, you see," I told her. "What was once referred to as the house detective."

She grew pale, and the light dimmed in her eyes. "Oh," she said very softly.

I steered her toward the arched entrance to the hotel's lounge, a short distance on our left. She offered no resistance. Once inside, I sat her down in one of the leather booths and then seated myself opposite. A blue-uniformed waiter approached, but I shook my head and he retreated.

I examined the girl across the

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polished surface of the table. The diffused orange glow from the small lantern in its center gave her classic features the impression of purity and innocence, and turned her seal-brown hair into a cascading black wave. I judged her age at about twenty-five. I said quietly, "Without a doubt, you're the most beautiful dip I've ever encountered."

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?"

"Certainly not."

"A dip is underworld slang for a pickpocket."

She tried to affect indignation. "Are you insinuating that *I* . . .?"

"Oh, come now," I said. "There's no purpose to be served in further histrionics. I saw you lift Mr. Stuyvesant's wallet and his diamond stickpin. I was sitting directly opposite the elevator, not fifteen feet away."

She didn't say anything. Her fingers toyed with the catch on the tan suede bag. After a moment, her eyes lifted to mine, briefly, and then dropped again to the bag. She sighed in a tortured way. "You're right, of course. I stole those things."

I reached out, gently took the bag from her and snapped it open. Stuyvesant's wallet, with the needle-point of the stickpin now imbedded in the leather, lay on top of the various feminine articles inside. I removed them, glanced at her identification long enough to memorize her name and address, reclosed the bag and returned it to her.

She said softly, "I'm . . . not a thief, I want you to know that. Not really, I mean." She took her lower lip between her teeth tremulously. "I have this . . . *compulsion* to steal. I'm powerless to stop myself."

"Kleptomania?"

"Yes. I've been to three different psychiatrists during the past year, but they've been unable to cure me."

I shook my head sympathetically. "It must be terrible for you."

"Terrible," she agreed. "When . . . when my father learns of this episode, he'll have me put into a sanatorium." Her voice quavered. "He threatened to do just that if I ever stole anything again, and he doesn't make idle threats."

I studied her. Presently, I said, "Your father doesn't have to know what happened here today."

"He . . . he doesn't?"

"No," I said slowly. "There was no real harm done, actually. Mr. Stuyvesant will get his wallet and stickpin back. And I see no reason for causing the hotel undue embarrassment through the attendant

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publicity if I report the incident."

Her face brightened hopefully. "Then . . . you're going to let me go?"

I drew a long breath. "I suppose I'm too soft-hearted for the type of position that I have. Yes, I'm going to let you go. But you have to promise me that you'll never set foot inside the Hotel Poole again."

"Oh, I promise!"

"If I see you here in the future, I'll have to report you to the police."

"You won't!" she assured me eagerly. "I . . . have an appointment with another psychiatrist tomorrow morning. I feel sure he can help me."

I nodded. "Very well, then." I turned to stare through the arched lounge entrance at the guests and uniformed bellboys scurrying back and forth in the lobby. When I turned back again, the street door to the lounge was just closing and the girl was gone.

I sat there for a short time, thinking about her. If she was a kleptomaniac, I reflected, then I was Mary, Queen of Scots. What she was, of course, was an accomplished professional pickpocket—her technique was much too polished, her hands much too skilled—and an extremely adept liar.

I smiled to myself, and stood and went out into the lobby again. But instead of resuming my position in the baroque chair before the elevator bank, or approaching the horseshoe-shaped desk, I veered left to walk casually through the double-glass entrance doors and out to Powell Street.

As I made my way through the thickening late-afternoon crowds—my right hand lightly resting on the fat leather wallet and the diamond stickpin in my coat pocket—I found myself feeling a little sorry for the girl. But only just a little.

After all, Andrew J. Stuyvesant had been *my* mark from the moment I first noticed him entering the Hotel Poole that morning—and after a three-hour vigil I had been within fifteen seconds of dipping him myself when she appeared virtually out of nowhere.

Wouldn't you say I was entitled to the swag?

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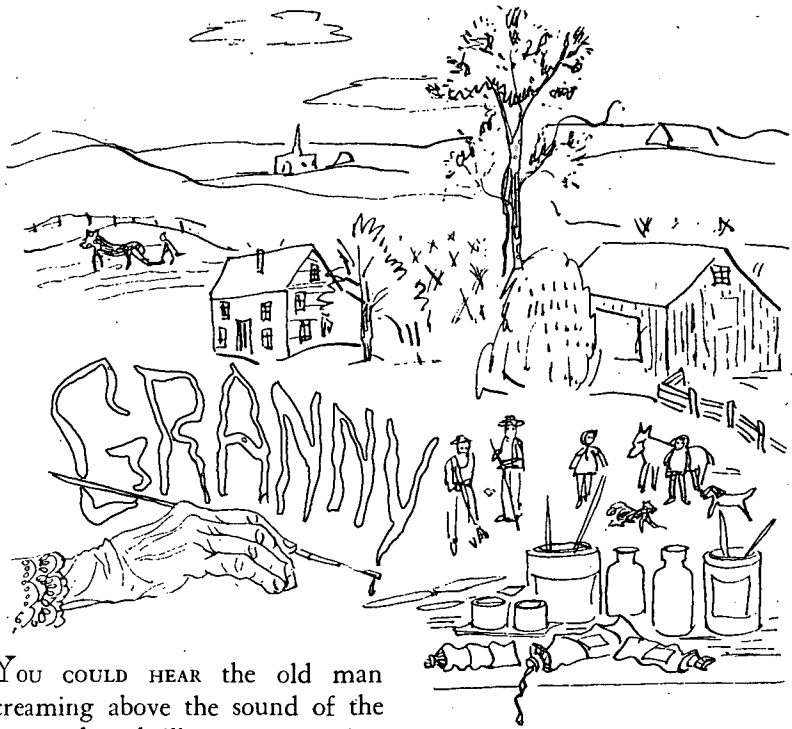
Dedication to the truth is said to be its own reward, but certain circumstances may prompt an unforeseen bonus.



You could hear the old man screaming above the sound of the storm, the shrill cry emanating from a toothless mouth.

Roy McAlbin, medium-sized and slightly overweight, took a cigarette out of his trench coat pocket and leaned against the veranda rail. The rain was falling heavily, just missing his back.

"And what's that, Doctor Caswell?"

"I'm not a doctor, Mr. McAlbin," said the lean, middle-aged Caswell, standing straight on the doormat outside the entrance to the office building.

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"Okay, Mr. Caswell, why is that old guy yelling in his cottage over there?"

Caswell, rubbing his left palm on the glass doorknob of his office door, frowned across the wooden veranda. "Mr. McAlbin, I can appreciate the fact that as a journalist, even a free-lance journalist unattached to any actual publication, you are curious. But I can't begin to answer every question which comes to mind."

"You're not a psychologist either, are you?"

"No, I myself am not, though we have both qualified doctors and accredited psychological personnel here at Paxville Woods."

"You've also got one of the best known primitive painters in America." McAlbin puffed on his filtered cigarette, then rubbed his fingers over his damp, plump cheeks. "A lot of people are interested in Granny Goodwaller, Mr. Caswell."

"Yes, we know that, Mr. McAlbin," replied Caswell. "You keep putting an odd emphasis on the word *got*."

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "I'm curious as to why Granny Goodwaller moved out of her apartment up the hill in your Paxville Village three months ago. I wonder why she's now here in your Paxville Woods in a cottage nobody can get into. I'd like to interview her."

"Yes, I understood you when you first presented yourself and your case," said Caswell. He stopped rubbing at the glass knob and moved closer to McAlbin. "Paxville is a wonderful place for older people. Up there, beyond the woods, we have houses and apartments where our old-timers, singly or in couples, can live out their autumn years in well-ordered comfort. Down here in the hospital and cottage area we have, obviously, more medically oriented facilities. We even have put in an intensive-care cluster of private bungalows."

"Then Granny is ill?"

Caswell said, "Granny is ninety years old. She is, as you say, a major American artist. We were honored when she decided, nearly five years ago, to come and live in our then just starting Paxville complex. She is very old, Mr. McAlbin. She

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needs much looking after. She cannot be interviewed."

"But she's still painting?"

"Yes. Granny conserves her strength and continues to be quite productive. If you stop in either of the fine art galleries in Paxville Village or at the Gallery in Brimstone you'll see her latest work on display. The original oils may be a bit costly for someone in the free-lance writing game, but you'll also find many lovely greeting cards and prints."

"I've already seen the paintings in Paxville," said McAlbin. The old man in the brown shingle cottage down the hill had stopped crying. The rain still fell cold and hard. The afternoon was already growing dark. "The display of Granny's paintings at the Marcus Galleries in New York—those are recent, too?"

"Yes," said Caswell. "The Marcus Card Company helped to make Granny famous and she insists they get her best work. Well, I really can't give you much more time, Mr. McAlbin. Thank you for your interest in Granny. I'm going to tell her you called and I'm sure it will bring a sad, sweet smile to her face."

"Where does she work now? In this cottage of hers?" asked McAlbin. He dropped his cigarette butt over the veranda rail onto the short-cropped grass near the porch.

"She sometimes paints at the cottage, yes," said Caswell. "She has, in addition, a large workshop here in our main building."

"Could I see that?"

"It is merely a large room, full of stretched canvas, smelling of paint and turpentine."

"Seeing places where artists work helps me," said McAlbin. "I still intend to do a piece on Granny Goodwaller and her work. Since you won't allow me to visit with her, you can at least let me see where she creates her paintings."

Caswell said, after a sharp sniffing, "Very well. Come around this way." He went striding off along the porch, frowning back. "Don't strew any more cigarettes on the grounds, please."

Fifteen minutes later McAlbin left the place. Under his coat, wrapped in a paint rag, were a palette knife and a teacup he had grabbed in the chill studio while Caswell was lifting down an album of greeting-card proofs. McAlbin fisted his hands into his trench coat pockets as he walked down the flagstone path toward the parking area. Some two dozen cottages were scattered around the ten acres of Paxville. The grass and shrubs were neat and trim, most of the flowers beginning to

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fade and brown. McAlbin had come here to Connecticut on a hunch. "I'm right," he said to himself. He got into his car and drove off toward town.

Dry leaves swooped and dipped, clattering against the small leaded windows of the Brimstone Art Gallery. McAlbin put one pale fist into the pocket of his coat and made a sound with his tongue that was a faint echo of the sound the wind and the dead leaves were making. "Nope, nope," he muttered. He was standing toward the back of the big one-room gallery and he'd been going carefully from one Granny Goodwaller painting to another. He was stopped now in front of a bright scene of little girls saddling a pony in a summer field; tiny figures and a stiff-legged dirt-brown pony. "Nope," repeated McAlbin.

"Not at all," said a gentle voice just behind him.

McAlbin turned and noticed a very pretty auburn-haired girl standing there, her face still slightly flushed from the morning wind outside. "Beg pardon?" he said.

"You were looking negative and I wanted to assure you little girls do have ponies that color." Freckles made two dim arcs beneath her bright eyes. "I did, for instance."

"You're reassuring," said McAlbin. "I never had a pony as a boy, but I did have a bicycle. My uncle painted it the same color as that ugly horse."

"You don't seem to care for Granny's work."

"Nope. If this area had to depend on people with my kind of taste, your whole Granny Goodwaller industry would collapse."

"It's not my industry exactly," said the girl. "I'm co-owner of a gift shop near Paxville Village."

"My name, by the way, is Roy McAlbin," he told her. "I'm a free-lance journalist. Who are you?"

"Nan Hendry." She smiled quietly. "You didn't come to this part of Connecticut to see our famous paintings, then?"

"Well, yes. But not exactly to admire them."

Nan touched her cheek with her left hand, tracing the arc the freckles made. "I don't quite understand."

"Look, Nan," he said, "would you be interested in dinner?"

"Yes, that might be nice. Tonight, did you mean?"

McAlbin refilled his glass, set the wine bottle near at hand on the checkered tablecloth. "I like this little inn," he said to Nan, "and this little inn restaurant. There's an almost European feeling about the

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place." The logs in the nearby fireplace crackled and shifted, and he paused. "Though they shouldn't be serving this New York wine. No, the only good domestic wines come from a few of the lesser-known California vintners."

"You've been to most places?" asked the pretty girl. "To Europe and all of the United States?"

"Sure. One of the great advantages of the free-lance life is travel. I need to pack only my camera and some underwear, plus my portable typewriter. Actually I don't even need that because I can write shorthand and just rent a typewriter someplace or cable in a story. Depends on whom I'm working for."

"Who is it this time?"

"Nobody yet. I'm keeping this one quiet until I get more material. Then I'll hit one of the news weeklies or some picture mag. Sell them the whole package for a flat fee."

"What, exactly, are you investigating? I mean, I don't want to pry into your methods. Still, I am interested."

McAlbin sipped his wine. "That's good, Nan. I'll tell you, you meet a lot of girls, here and overseas, who don't care for what a guy does at all. Any sort of shop talk bores them. Not that they're particularly domestic, either. No, they're just nitwits and not much else. By the time a man is thirty, which is what I just was three weeks ago, society thinks he should be settled down. I can't see any reason to settle down, though, especially with a nitwit."

"Obviously you aren't married."

"Nope. Most women wouldn't put up with the roving pattern of my life," he said. "I've been at this for six years now, almost seven, ever since I got out of the service. I have this, and I'm telling you because you seem to be an exceptional sort of girl and one who understands, this real drive toward finding the truth. Finding the truth, digging it out. Sometimes the truth will hurt people, sometimes even destroy them. You can't let that worry you. The truth is like a torch, sort of, and you have to keep it burning."

"Yes, I can understand that, Roy." Nan touched at her cheek, smiled. "A lot of men don't have the kind of courage you do. It reminds me of my father."

McAlbin laughed. "Really? Not of my father. Well, I can't really say. My parents never amounted to much. Now, I'm more or less an orphan anyhow."

"I'm sorry."

"It's just the truth. Nothing to be sorry over."

Nan said, "I really am interested in your work, Roy. If you want to

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talk about this current project of yours, I'd love to listen. Sometimes your kind of work can be pretty lonely, I imagine."

"Well," he said, "this is no marriage scandal or crime-syndicate stuff. It's not even political. I think, however, there is a nice little yarn here and I'm going to follow through. See, I was out in San Francisco a couple weeks back and I saw a show of new paintings by your Granny Goodwaller. I was only passing through Frisco, not even in the mood to look up the friends I have there. For all they know, I'm still over in the Pacific or some such place. Anyway, Nan, I got to looking at those paintings and something struck me. I don't know why nobody else has noticed. Probably because Granny Goodwaller occupies a rather peculiar place in American art; not a real artist and yet not merely a commercial painter. A primitive, yes, but a very successful one. Very rich."

"What," asked Nan, bending toward him, "did you notice?"

"The paintings are fake," said McAlbin.

Nan sat up and frowned. "You mean somebody out there is selling forged Granny Goodwaller paintings?"

"That was the first thing I thought," said McAlbin. "So I, carefully and quite subtly, asked the gallery people some questions. This was a very sedate art setup on Post Street and I found out they got their paintings from Paxville, Connecticut, from the gallery up in the retirement town that's been handling Granny's output for several years."

"But, Roy," said the lovely girl, "what would that mean?"

"If I'm right," he answered, "and I know enough about painting to be fairly sure I am, it means something odd is going on in Paxville. See, Nan, I've covered a couple of art-fraud cases before, though those involved fake old masters. I'm certain the dozen paintings I saw out in Frisco are fakes. So are most of them on display in Paxville and so are ten of the fifteen in the Brimstone Gallery where we met this morning."

Nan inhaled sharply. "What exactly do you think is going on, Roy?"

"It might just be Granny, being in her nineties, can't crank that stuff out as fast as she used to and has an assistant to help fill the orders." He leaned back, comfortable, and the firelight glowed on his plump face. "However, Nan, I came here because a nice counternotion occurred to me. I'm checking it out."

"Your theory is what?"

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"The whole Paxville setup is private," said McAlbin. "I looked it up. I also found out Granny Goodwaller has no close relatives. Suppose the old girl had a stroke and couldn't paint anymore?" He rubbed his wine glass across his chin. "Or suppose, which is what really intrigues me, suppose the grand old lady of the American primitives had up and died. It might be to the advantage of the people around Paxville to keep her alive."

"That's dreadful," said the girl. "Why would anyone pretend Granny was alive if she were dead?"

"As long as Granny paintings keep coming off the assembly line a lot of money keeps coming into Paxville. Caswell and a couple of his buddies are partners in a company that handles the selling of Granny's work, as well as the merchandising of it. You know, they license the use of her paintings for greeting cards and calendars."

"Yes, I sell them in my gift shop." Nan let her slender hands rest on the tabletop. She shook her head. "I suppose what you suggest is remotely possible, Roy. Still, it seems like an awful thing for someone to do. What do the other people with whom you've discussed your theory say?"

"I'm not the confiding type," said McAlbin softly. "Not usually."

"Well, I appreciate your confiding in me. It's a pretty unsettling theory you have."

"Not only a theory," he said. "When I was out at Paxville a couple days ago I swiped a palette knife and a teacup that are supposed to belong to Granny. After I finish up here I'm going to have the prints checked out in Washington—and there are fingerprints."

"Well," said Nan. "And how much longer will you be here?"

"I still want to get a look at Granny's cottage on the Paxville grounds," said McAlbin. "And, since I try to keep an open mind, I'll even try to get a look at Granny herself."

"Maybe I can help out."

"Oh, so?"

She frowned again. "I'll think about it and let you know," she said.

"I've been talking too much about myself anyway," said McAlbin. "Let's shift gears, Nan. Talk about you."

The girl looked down at her hands, biting her lip. Then she smiled across at him. "Very well, Roy . . ."

The next day was dry and clear. At ten in the morning Nan called him. McAlbin had been sitting on the edge of his bed in his room at the Brimstone Inn, making notes

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in one of the dimestore tablets he liked to use.

"I think I can help you," the girl said.

McAlbin doodled her name in the margin of the pad. "With what, Nan? I don't want you getting yourself tangled in this Paxville business."

"What you told me last night was very unsettling. I just don't like to see something like that going on here," she said. "Okay, you say you're not absolutely sure. I think you should make sure. I may be able to help you find out more."

"I appreciate that, Nan. Still, there are risks . . ."

"Don't let me foul up your plans, Roy. But I have an idea."

"Go ahead, tell me."

She said, "I know one of the attendants at Paxville Woods. No matter what you may think is going on out there, Ben is an honest man."

"Ben, okay. So?"

"You said you wanted to get inside, to get a look at the cottage where Granny lives."

"I sure do. You mean this friend of yours, honest Ben, can get me inside the place?"

"I can ask him. I wanted to make sure, first, it was okay with you."

McAlbin nodded into the phone mouthpiece. "Sounds not bad."

"I'll get in touch with Ben and try to set up something for tonight or some night soon," the girl said in her soft, gentle voice. "If you don't mind, I'd like to drive you there."

"I'm not sure that'd be safe for you."

"Roy, I want to help. Please."

He nodded again. "Okay, Nan."

"I'll call you back soon as I know something."

"Thanks, Nan. I appreciate you."

She called him back in a little under two hours.

That evening, McAlbin stood in the thickening twilight and listened. There was a chill quiet all around. He reached out and touched the wire gate in the big hurricane fence. Then, very slowly, he turned the handle. The gate opened and no alarm sounded. He gave a coughing sigh. Nan's friend had done as promised. McAlbin eased through the gate and closed it after him. There was woodland here, stiff straight trees, crisp mounds of fallen leaves. He walked slowly downhill, moving as silently as he could.

After a few descending minutes he could see the lights of the cottages he wanted. Three of the six in this sector had lights on. McAlbin halted, still in the woods, and took a penciled drawing from his coat pocket. Granny's cottage

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was the third from the left. He lifted his glance from the tablet page to the view of the cottages. There were windows glowing in the cottage that was hers. He folded the paper away, slid out his miniature camera.

There were no attendants near the cottage. He stayed in the shadows of the trees and made sure. Then, while night began to drop slowly down around him, McAlbin advanced across the grounds. He bent low when he was near Granny's and approached parallel to the hedge around the cottage. He eased very carefully toward the lighted window.

A radio was playing old music inside. A rocking chair rocked. McAlbin adjusted his camera and walked to the window. He stretched to his full height and was able to see inside. There was an easel in the knotty-pine room. A half-finished painting of tiny people on a sleigh ride showed on the easel. McAlbin saw a gray head and a wool-shawled back. A hand was weakly brushing muddy brown paint onto the flanks of a tiny horse. He clicked a picture.

The hand placed the brush aside and then lifted off the gray wig. Caswell stood up, cast off the shawl and pointed a pistol straight at the window.

McAlbin spun, ran—in a new direction, not the same way he'd come.

The last of the daylight sank away, thin blue darkness filled the forest. The trees grew black. There was a quiet, ominous clarity all around him. McAlbin pressed his spread-fingered hands hard against his soft chest, chewed in the chill air through his mouth. He tried to breath silently, but he had developed a dry wheeze while climbing slowly uphill through the wood.

He listened for pursuit and heard none. A thin, chill mist was moving through the sharp, bare trees. He continued to work his way upward. Leaves crackled at every careful step, noise of his progress went rippling down through the dry brush. McAlbin stopped again, listening hard. He heard no sounds but his own. Pain was growing up through his ribs, squeezing at his lungs. He sighed and resumed his climb.

McAlbin couldn't keep track of the trees. He got the impression they were changing their positions. Halting, he squinted into the cold darkness. He gave a quick, startled inhalation. There was someone standing, still and waiting, at the crest of the hill; someone waiting patiently, dark and straight as one of the dead trees. McAlbin was certain there was a man up there, to his left; one of the attendants probably, a big, wide man, antici-

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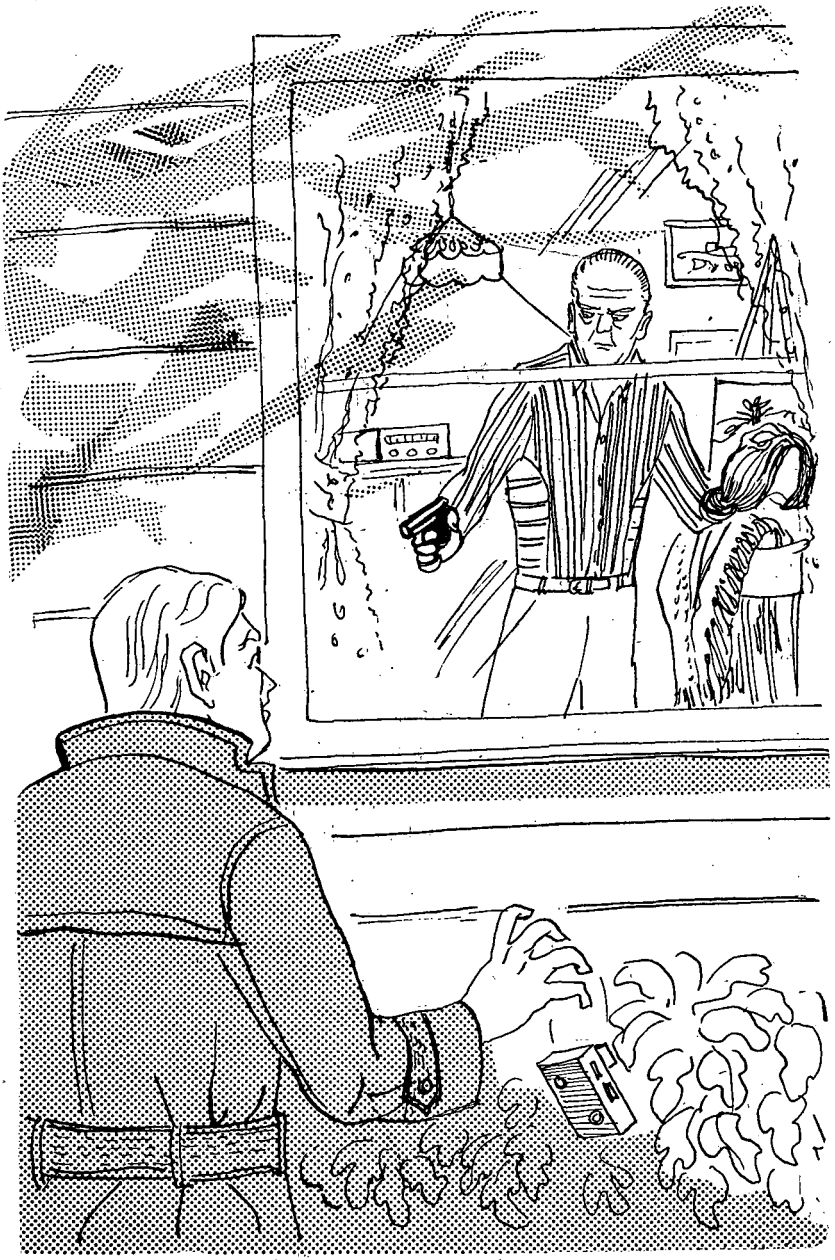

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pating him. McAlbin crouched, dropped to his hands and knees and began working slowly away from the waiting figure. He kept low, scuffing his palms and his soft knees on thorns, scraps of fallen tree limbs. He raised himself up long minutes later, scanning, then quickly dropped. There was someone else up there on the horizon waiting for him; another man, standing with arms folded and feet wide apart, blurred by the growing mist, but certainly there.

He began to crawl in a new direction, even more quietly, slowly. He tried to make no sound, to move and breathe without attracting any attention. The mist thickened and the chill of the deepening night increased. McAlbin looked at his watch. He found he'd been in the forest only thirteen minutes. He sighed again, moved ahead.

A long time later, about eleven minutes of actual time, he came to the edge of the wood and saw below him the small clearing off the roadway where Nan had parked the car. She was still there, her car shadowed by the low, spiky branches of an evergreen. Not caring about alarms now, McAlbin ran for the wire fence, leaped for a hold and climbed over. No bells rang.

He hit the outside ground and ran for the car. He grabbed the passenger door and jumped in. "Get away from here," he said, and then stopped.

Caswell was behind the wheel, the same small revolver in his right hand. With his left, he reached down and clicked off the car radio. "Trying to catch a weather report. Looks like we may have some snow tomorrow. Feels like it, too, don't you think?"

McAlbin got his breath, gasping. "Where's Nan?"

"One of my associates drove her home."

"You can't get by with all this, Caswell; tracking me like some kind of wild game and kidnapping Nan Hendry. This is suburban Connecticut, not some feudal kingdom."

"She isn't kidnapped, she's in fine shape." said Caswell. "Nan simply happens to be on our side, as are many people. You yourself, Mr. McAlbin, pointed out how many of the residents in our area are dependent on Granny for their living. With one thing and another, the old broad represented roughly a million and a half a year to us. When she died this spring we decided to ignore the fact. Her dreadfully simplistic style is quite easy to imitate. A young artist friend of Nan's paints the Granny pictures for us. No one but you has

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tumbled to our little operation."

"I made a mistake confiding in Nan, huh?"

"Never confide in anyone you don't have to," replied Caswell. "I wish nearly two dozen people in and around Paxville didn't have to be in on the Granny venture. However, a complex plan often means a large number of participants."

"Granny Goodwaller is already supposed to be ninety. How long can you pretend she's alive?"

"Five more years at least," said Caswell, "which will gross us well over five million dollars; perhaps even more if a couple of merchandising plans now in the works materialize. Then we can afford to let her die. Greed would enter in if we tried to keep this up forever, suspicion might grow. Fortunately Granny, much like yourself, has no immediate relatives, no one to cause us trouble. She, too, was an independent free-lance person."

"I'm not completely without connections. What are you thinking of doing?"

"I know you have a stubborn, often cruel, dedication to the truth," said Caswell. "Letting you go, no, that won't work. You can't be bribed, nor trusted to keep quiet. That teacup you got away with upset me, too. My prints may be on it and they are on file in certain places. No, you simply can't be let outside for the time being."

"What kind of arrogant talk is this? You think you can kill me because I found out your game?"

"We're not going to kill you, Mr. McAlbin," said Caswell. "Simply keep you here and out of trouble."

"How do you think you're going to keep me in an old folks' home?"

"Quite simple," said Caswell.

The door behind McAlbin opened and someone put a hand over his mouth and yanked him from the car.

Within a week they had pulled all his teeth, bleached his hair white, roughed his skin, put him in an intensive-care bungalow and fed him drugs. They told him he was a very sick old man—and, for quite a long time, he believed them.

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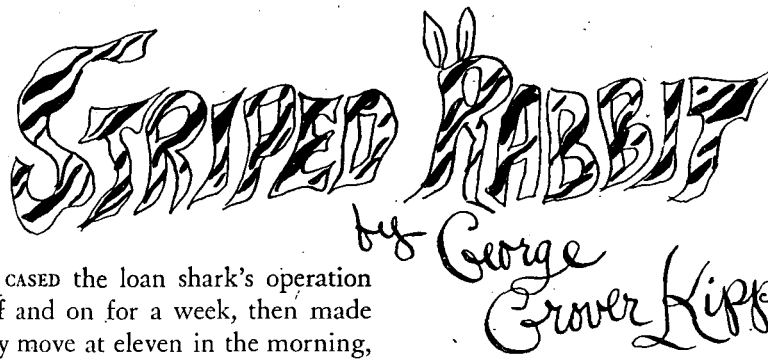
The fable of the lamb following the wolf in sheep's clothing is universally known, but a striped rabbit . . . ?



I CASED the loan shark's operation off and on for a week, then made my move at eleven in the morning, just ahead of the noon rush of clerks and sales personnel. The place figured to be loaded with cash and short on customers at that hour. I was wearing a four-day beard, dark glasses, and had the customary gold foil around my two front uppers, the dental gimmick that had caused the newspapers to dub me Goldtooth. I'd made maybe a dozen heists using it, and it was worth its weight in gold, no pun intended. Immediately the heist was over, it could be dropped in any refuse can or storm sewer. Once, when I'd figured the time element too closely, I'd even swallowed the gold foil as the law threatened to scoop me up.

The flunkie behind the desk was overly solicitous until we were inside the cubbyhole that served as his office. When the forty-five automatic appeared in my hand, he sagged boggle-eyed into a chair. I grinned, giving him a good look at my gold-plated teeth.

"Up easy, sonny," I said and handed him my small briefcase. "Take this to the safe and fill it to the top. Be quick about it, and don't get any stupid ideas of calling for help or giving an alarm because I can drill a tomato can at one hundred feet. Besides, you'll never be out of my sight. Just make like you're granting a loan to another sucker."

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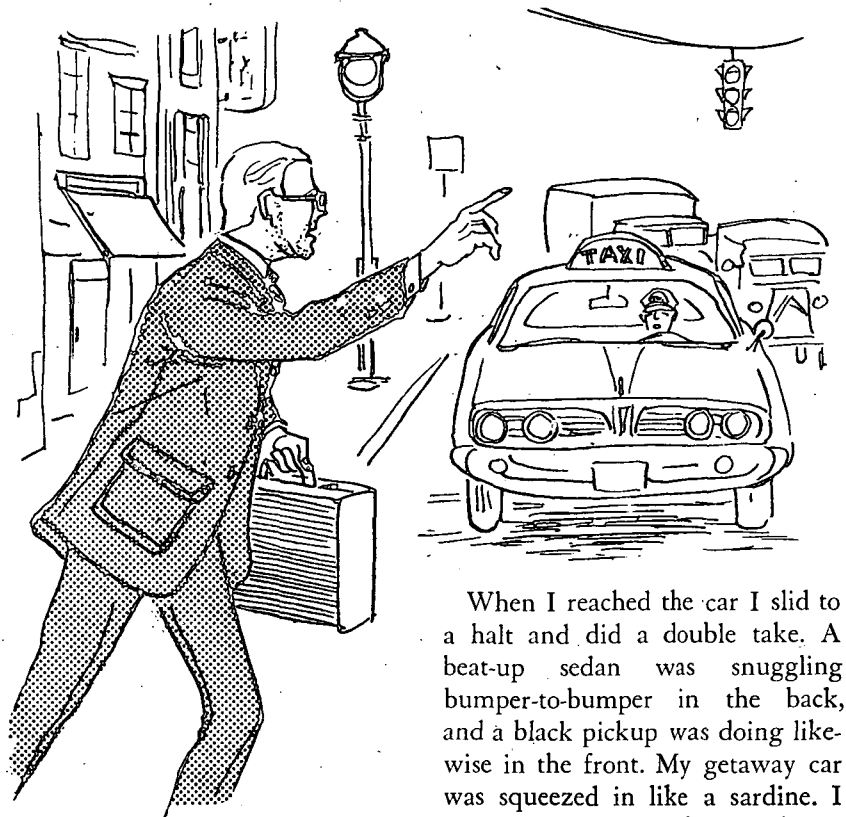
The clerk swallowed with difficulty, then took the briefcase in his shaking hand and moved toward the safe. He paused once to look back but a flash of my gold teeth sent him on toward the safe.

When he returned, I took the money from him and tilted my head toward the rest room. "Get lost. And don't stick your head out the door for a good five minutes or I'll blow it off." As soon as he'd closed the door behind him, I stood up and sauntered outside to a hot convertible around the corner. I don't usually play it so classy, but the doctor who owned the car had flown east for a medical convention. I usually swipe a nondescript compact.



When I reached the car I slid to a halt and did a double take. A beat-up sedan was snuggling bumper-to-bumper in the back, and a black pickup was doing likewise in the front. My getaway car was squeezed in like a sardine. I tried the doors of both vehicles with a hope of getting inside and

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shifting them out of gear so I could ease them out of the way with the convertible, but it was a lost cause. They were both locked.

Time was running out, I was in a strange part of town, and the outraged clerk would soon be standing in the middle of the sidewalk screaming bloody murder. I'd had it—and then a cab wheeled around the corner. . . .

The cabby was a lanky individual who appeared to be a bit on the sleepy side. I waved as he approached me, but it was only by jumping into the street nearly in front of him and slapping my hand on the window that I managed to stop him. I had no more than crawled into the hack and closed the back door when the clerk from the loan office came into view in the rear-view mirror. He was waving his arms like a madman, and from the way his big yap was opened he must have been screaming at the top of his inadequate lungs.

Not that it bothered me. The cabby slid the hack back into the flow of traffic without a moment's hesitation. "Where to, mister?"

I peered over my shoulder at the agitated loan-company flunkie. "Twenty-first and Sandy."

The cabby nodded, but instead of heading directly east he swung the cab north on Broadway. I expected him to go out to Twenty-first and then swing over to Sandy Boulevard, but he kept right on going until he was at Eightieth and Sandy. Then he slid the cab up to the curb before my hotel.

"No sense in getting out at Twenty-first and then calling another cab or catching a bus," he said indifferently. "Now you're home safe."

I had a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. Nobody knows where I live. In my business, such a precaution is merely part of my way of life. "What makes you so sure I live here?" I growled gruffly.

The cabby turned in the seat and grinned. "I've seen you coming and going lots of times. Not to mention the other times when you were sitting in the lobby with a newspaper or magazine, usually in the corner chair." He pointed to my briefcase. "Better get that up to your room, or wherever it is you intend to take it. The streets will be crawling with cops looking for an unshaved character in smoked glasses and carrying a briefcase . . . But don't worry about it. I haven't seen you."

"You're outta your tree," I bluffed inadequately.

The cabby shook his head tolerantly from side to side, a faint grin on his face. "I'm a true-crime buff. I read maybe twelve or fourteen

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different magazines a month on the subject. It intrigues me no end. I first spotted you when you heisted the liquor store out in Beaverton about six months ago. It was a real neat job."

I had difficulty swallowing. "Beaverton? A liquor store, six months ago?"

The cabby's grin widened. "That's right, and when you left the place you cut across a vacant lot. Only when you came out on the far side you'd switched your reversible coat from bright red to a dull green, got rid of the shades, and swapped the cap for a hat. Nobody would have connected you with the heist. Then you got into a maroon car, drove to Powell and Thirty-third and abandoned it. From there you caught a bus back downtown and transferred to another one that delivered you right over there on the corner."

I had the feeling I was in a day-type nightmare. "If you knew so much about me why didn't you blow the whistle?"

The cabby fished a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. "I'm a hackie, not a cop, and like I said, my hobby is true crimes and criminals. I'd always wanted to watch a real artist at work, and when I spotted you casing the liquor store I couldn't resist the urge to tail you and see how you worked. As a matter of fact, I've been tailing you on and off ever since. There was a supermarket, another liquor store, and two loan companies . . ."

"You're a nut," I managed to croak. "A genuine fresh-off-the-tree filbert." The guy had pegged me right down to my shoelaces. "You could get killed following people that way. And how did you know I was going to knock off that liquor store?"

The cabby held up his trip sheet. "I went to that store every afternoon to pick up a fifth of Scotch for a dingaling broad who's been on the sauce for the last five years. In fact, I still go there for her. You were in the vicinity for a week—close, but not too close—and you never bought but one bottle. It figured you were up to something. I sat in my hack and watched the whole operation."

I curbed the almost overwhelming urge to run. "And you went to all this trouble just because true crimes interest you?"

"They don't just interest me," the cabby said. "I find them downright fascinating. Take yourself; I checked you out from every angle in the book because you were part of the picture. You're Joey Bond, thirty-two, six feet, blue eyes, one hundred and seventy pounds. You seldom drink, but you can't pass up a gamble."

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"What's the gimmick?" I growled. "How much am I supposed to shell out to keep your mouth shut?"

The cabby looked hurt. "I'm not looking for a payoff. If I was I'd have been after you when you knocked off the supermarket. That was a beautiful job. Four of you knocking down nearly fifty grand."

I could feel my jaw sagging stupidly. "You didn't sit down the street in your hack and watch that job, too?" I knew before I asked that that was exactly what he'd done.

The cabby held out a hand. "I'm Harvey Plock. I own two cabs, and drive the relief shift. Since we're going to be friends, we might as well start getting acquainted."

I shook his hand. "And you do all this strictly as a hobby of sorts?"

Harvey grinned. "My big dream is to set up a foolproof job, say one in the hundred thousand dollar bracket. Not that I want any of the action. It's just that so many guys foul up on what should be easy heists it makes me wonder what kind of nuts they are. What I mean is, I'd like to see if I can set up a perfect job."

"Everybody should have a dream," I agreed weakly. I gave Harvey a ten-spot and eased out of the cab, anxious to be rid of him.

"I'll see you around," he called cheerfully as I reached the hotel door.

He was a man of his word. He showed up three days later, all excited about a bank robbery in Salem. The next week it was another bank job, only in Sacramento. "Foolish," he muttered with a shake of his head. "They not only didn't get enough loot to make it worth their while, they got their pictures taken in the process. Stupid is probably a better word."

"You could do better?" I grunted.

"At midnight, in a tomb, with my eyes shut," Harvey said firmly. He reached inside his jacket and produced a folded paper. "Take a look at that. As a professional, you should be able to spot any weak spots in a plan."

As I studied the paper, he filled in the picture with a running commentary. The plan was well laid out, bespeaking a great deal of work and a thorough knowledge of banks and law-enforcement procedure. "What about the getaway vehicle?" I asked.

"That's the real gimmick," Harvey said, his eyes twinkling. "When you come from the bank, I'll be there in my cab. I'll pick you up, deliver you across town, and go on my way. There's abso-

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lutely nothing unusual in that. If the law does follow the scent to me, I simply tell them I hauled you to Union Station. The case should make the front pages all over the country. That is, if you can get three more men to help you . . ."

At first, Fingers Fenshaw thought I was kidding. Then he eyed me dubiously. "You mean you're *really* going to take a cab away from the bank after the heist?" He made it sound like I'd slipped my gears.

I'd sent for him, Monk Adams and Homer Rolfe so I could lay Harvey's plan out before them. Fingers works his expertise on stubborn vaults and strongboxes. Monk worked in Hollywood in the makeup department once, and his ability along those lines is invaluable. Homer is just a good all-around heist man.

Monk and Homer had met head-on in their usual game of gin rummy as soon as they reached the motel on the outskirts of town. Monk had lost twelve dollars to Homer at our last get-together and he was trying to win it back. Fingers was interested in two things: the bottle in his hand and the upcoming heist. "Why the change in procedure? We've always done all right by using a hot car and dumping it right after the caper. Using a hack sounds like something out of a television script."

"So it's different," I said agreeably. "But that doesn't mean it won't work. Actually, the stolen-car bit has been run into the ground. Anymore, when a bank gets knocked off, the first thing the bully boys do when they converge on the scene is check all the cars in sight against their stolen-vehicle list. It's getting to be a sensitive area and sooner or later somebody is going to get knocked off because of the stolen car. With a cab, we can be cruising quietly through town while the law hunts for a stolen car that hasn't been stolen."

Fingers chewed his lower lip dubiously. He was ready to tip either way with a good nudge. I played my trump ace. "Think of the headlines, Fingers: Thugs Rob Bank; Call Cab To Haul Loot Away. It'll be the caper of the decade."

A gleam crossed Fingers' dark eyes. If there was one thing that appealed to his weird nature, above and beyond a highly profitable heist, it was the attendant publicity. "You've got a good point," he admitted reluctantly, "but I'll withhold judgment until we run it through rehearsal a few times."

"It'll work," I promised. "And the beauty of it is, I know a cabby who'd give his eyeteeth to be part

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of a big heist. Even better is the fact he doesn't want any of the take."

Fingers had risen to add some water to his drink. Now he sat down gingerly and let his eyes stab clear through me. "The cabby *knows* about the heist? *And he doesn't want any of the take?* Man, you've gotta be puttin' me on."

"Oh, but I'm not," I said. "Wait till you meet Harvey."

Fingers shook his head hopelessly. "Harvey . . . With a name like that he might even be a rabbit. Eight feet tall, yet. How well do you know this Harvey?"

I told him all about Harvey, his mania for true-crime books, and how he'd hauled me away from the loan-company heist. "All the guy wants to talk about is robberies and heist men, if you can imagine it."

Fingers sipped his drink. "I've got an imagination that won't quit. Keep talking."

"He's real solid," I said. "I even went out to his house the other night and had dinner with him and his wife."

Fingers arched a brow. "The rabbit has a wife?"

I rose to pour myself a glass of orange pop. "Elly May."

"Elly May?" Fingers gurgled. "Now I know you're puttin' me on. That ain't a name. It's a description of some barefoot broad tripping through the cotton fields of Alabama or Mississippi."

"She's from Oklahoma," I said. "But come to think of it, she *was* barefoot the night I was out at the house and it seemed kinda natural for her. Maybe she really isn't used to shoes. All her kids were wearing them, though."

"All her kids?" Fingers asked fearfully.

"All five. Three boys, two girls."

"Aha," Fingers chortled victoriously. "So the rabbit really is a rabbit." He took a slow sip of his drink. "But, what the hell, everybody should have a hobby. Does this dingaling, Harvey, know of the risks involved? There could be a slipup and maybe some fireworks."

Fingers was leaning in my direction but I gave him an extra tug just in case. "We've talked it over and he knows. Like I said, it's his life's ambition to be a small part of one really big heist, something he can lie to his grandchildren about in his old age. It's like an obsession with him, and I sort of owe him the favor. There were times he could have blown the whistle on me."

Monk looked our way as Homer shuffled the cards. "He sounds like one of them nuts who plague the

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movie stars. If they can just see them or touch them or be near them, they're in seventh heaven . . . really in orbit."

I nodded. "That's Harvey exactly. Only his hangup is holdup men. It isn't exactly the dream of every red-blooded American boy but, as the old saying goes, it takes all kinds. Hell, I've even read about people who were gaga over executions and funerals."

"Have this Harvey drop by tomorrow," Fingers said. "After all, if I'm going to stick my chin out for a rabbit that's married to a cotton-patch Elly May, I want a good long look at him first." Fingers could be very cautious when the occasion demanded.

Harvey stopped in at the motel the next afternoon. He was a bit nervous, never having been in the company of four top heist men before, but he controlled himself admirably.

Fingers was openly skeptical, but his skepticism was an invaluable asset. If there was a flaw in the setup he would find it. He began sniping right off. "You own the cab?"

Harvey was flattered by the attention. "I own the franchise, and I've got two cabs with full-time drivers. Elly May and I take the relief shifts."

"Whadda you call the business?" Fingers probed. "The name of it?"

Harvey beamed. "The Tiger Taxi."

A glazed look came into Fingers' eyes. "The Tiger Taxi," he repeated slowly. "I suppose that means you're a real ball of fire. You chew up the competition and spit them all over the country."

Harvey grinned sheepishly and spooned his coffee noisily. "Not really. My dad called me tiger when I was a kid in the hills of Arizona, and when I got the franchise it seemed like a good name. Actually, the big taxi companies are real stiff competition."

Fingers pursued his questioning at length, hitting on all the pertinent angles of the upcoming heist. I'd worked on several jobs with him and Monk and Homer, and if he missed anything I couldn't figure out what it might be. The four of us enjoyed something of a reputation among both the lawmen and the lawless.

"The plan is the thing," Fingers said finally. "There is no such thing as a really successful caper on the spur of the moment, nor are sloppily planned jobs any better. The jails and prisons are loaded with idiots who thought otherwise. This caper calls for a lot of hard work but, properly done, it should be a real gasser."

Harvey's eyes lit up with pride.

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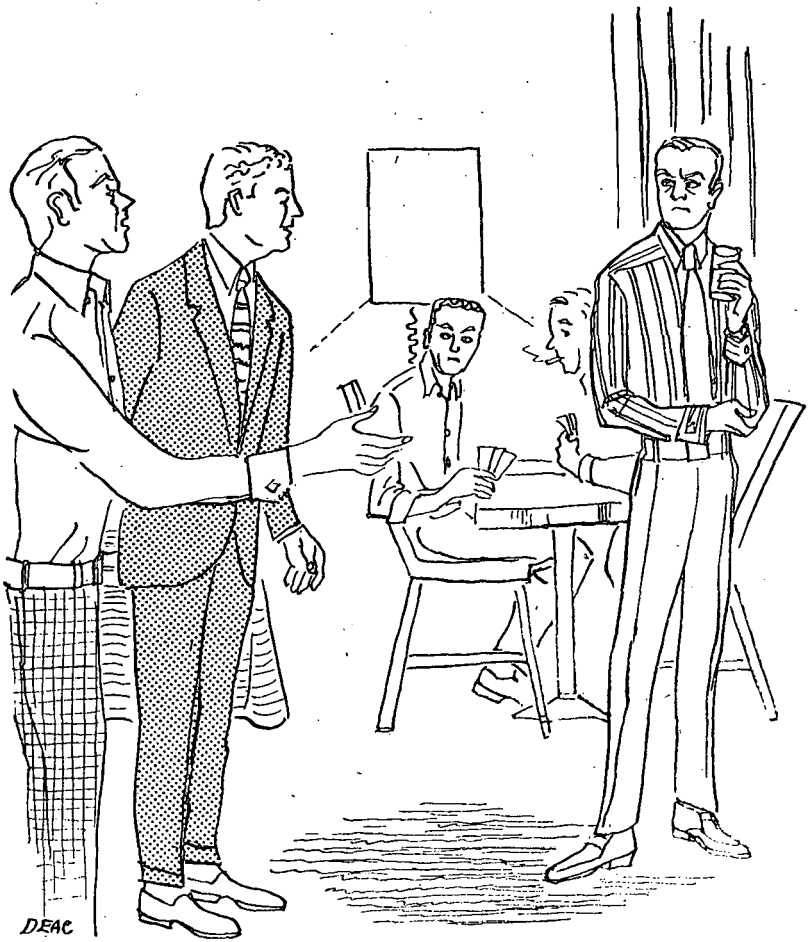

"I sure hope so. I worked on those plans for a long time."

"*You* worked on the plans?" Fingers grunted. He swiveled around in his chair to glare at me. I'd neglected to mention that Harvey was the mastermind behind the caper.

"It's every bit as good as I could have done," I said. "Maybe better."

"It seemed like a good plan," Harvey offered defensively.

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"Do you have any other hopes or dreams or nightmares?" Fingers growled sarcastically.

Harvey missed the point completely. "Oh, I like to run down to Reno or Vegas once in a while. You know, roll the dice, play a few hands of twenty-one or knock out some keno tickets; but my big dream is what you might call way-out. I've always wanted to take Elly May and the kids to Monte Carlo for the winter. They could swim and fish, and I'd putter around the casinos. If I had the money, I'd buy into some business over there. The taxes don't amount to anything, the cost of living is way down, and it's got a beautiful year-round climate. Someday maybe I'll make it."

Fingers upended the bottle and spiked his drink lavishly with a shaking hand. "Oh, you'd be a real smash at the big casino in Monte Carlo. I can just see your barefoot wife, your five rug rats, and you with a bottle of moonshine sticking out of the back pocket of your blue jeans. No doubt about it, you'd be a real sensation." He emptied his glass in three fast swallows.

We set up the caper for the following Wednesday, an hour before the bank closed. An extended study had shown that to be the time of heavy depositing, with lots of people around. In our business, a crowd is a form of insurance. Bank officials are rarely willing to risk the health and welfare of their customers. That gave us from Saturday through Tuesday for rehearsal.

We got together, the four of us and Harvey, and began going through the routine. When Harvey had to leave for his stint behind the wheel of the hack, we continued without him. When he returned he'd fall into the pattern as though he'd never been gone, and we'd go through it again and again. Fingers could be a harsh taskmaster.

The rehearsals were always the toughest part of the heist; the working out of the actual robbery, the secondary moves to be made in case the unexpected suddenly arose. With the floor plan of the bank pinned to the wall before our bloodshot eyes, we went through the routine until we were ready to scream. No drinking was permitted during this time, and Fingers grew increasingly short-tempered and irritable. On booze, he was mellow and happy-go-lucky; on straight black coffee, he was critical, sarcastic and shrewd. He drove us through the rehearsals until we were like automatons, controlled by some mastermind on a remote switch.

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We met in a hotel lobby a block from the bank at H-hour minus ten minutes. There was the usual exchange of wisecracks to show how blasé we were, but it was strictly an act. Deep inside we were all up-tight. Harvey handed me a voluminous briefcase. "The note demanding the one hundred grand is inside." His eyes were actually sparkling. Fingers checked his watch one last time and nodded toward the door.

Inside the bank I was forced to wait while the president, an obese and balding slob, wound up a conversation with some character in an expensive suit. When the guy in the fancy threads departed, I made my move.

I'd barely introduced myself as J. Dutton Southwick when the president's telephone rang. I knew without looking around that Harvey was in the phone booth around the corner. I was close enough that I could hear his voice clearly.

"Mr. Bright? You will please notice three men wearing dark topcoats and carrying satchels. They are standing between the tellers' windows and ostensibly filling out deposit slips. The bags they are carrying contain fifteen pounds of dynamite each. Please do not be alarmed as there is absolutely no danger if you obey my instructions. And you will please remember that if any of the bags is set down or dropped the contents will explode in exactly thirty seconds. That will give the three men sufficient time to reach safety. About your customers, I'm not so sure. Also, should anyone be foolish enough to try and pick up one of the bags after it has been placed on the floor, it will explode instantly. I hardly have to tell you what forty-five pounds of dynamite will do to your magnificent structure, not to mention the employees and customers. Follow my directions and there will be no violence. Play it stupid and you will definitely have cause for regret—if you survive. Take the briefcase from Mr. Southwick, the gentleman seated by your desk. Remove the note from the briefcase and, without reading it, pass it and the briefcase to one of your subordinates."

Mr. Bright had been caught off guard, but he was still a tryer. He cast his eyes about desperately, hoping for a miracle.

"Cool it, dad," I growled in a low voice. "Just take the bag and do like the man on the telephone said. Try playing it cute and you'll have meat hanging all over what's left of the joint."

There was a metallic snap to my voice that got through to Mr.

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Bright. He slumped resignedly in his chair and summoned a collegiate type who halted obsequiously beside his desk. When the flunky headed for the vault with the briefcase and the note, Mr. Bright studied me from beneath his veiled anger.

Monk had done his usual masterful job on my homely mug. I looked a full ten years older, graying hair and all, and the phoney contact lenses had changed my blue eyes to a mellow brown. On top of that, my ears had been enlarged and given oversized lobes. I noted with satisfaction that Mr. Bright was duly memorizing all the fictitious details of my appearance. I bared my two gold teeth in a grin, just to help him out. When the flunky returned and placed the bulging briefcase on the desk, it took an effort for me to control myself. One hundred grand does things to me. When the messenger was out of earshot, I smiled at Mr. Bright again. "It's time you paid a visit to the rest room."

He licked his lips, looked at the briefcase, and then to where Monk and Homer and Fingers still stood along the cages. It was easy to see he didn't like the odds. I was right behind him all the way to the rest room. As soon as he stepped inside, I grabbed one of the chairs along the hallway and jammed it under the knob. Monk, Homer and Fingers fell casually in behind me as I crossed the lobby and moved out the front door. With the exception of the president, there wasn't a soul in the bank who even suspected a heist had taken place.

Harvey had eased around the corner after making the telephone call and was waiting quietly at curbside in his cab.

We'd gone a block when Fingers sighed relievedly. "It worked. It worked like a charm!"

Monk sat licking his lips in anticipation. Homer's eyes were shining like diamond chips.

"The way you guys operate is sheer beauty," Harvey said reverently. He turned on the radio and fiddled with the dials. The news came on with a sudden blast. ". . . five men, four of them in dark topcoats, bare seconds ago. Three of the men are carrying satchels believed to contain dynamite. The fourth man is carrying a briefcase containing one hundred thousand dollars in cash. They are believed headed north in a taxi. Barricades are being thrown up within a ten-block radius of the scene. The alarm was phoned in by Mr. Kinder Bright, president of The First National, who recently had telephones installed in the bank's rest rooms and at other

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strategic locations in anticipation of such an eventuality . . ."

"Zowie!" Monk howled, panic-stricken. He'd done one jolt in stir and the thought of a return bout did things to him.

"Stash the bags and your coats under the back seat," Harvey snapped suddenly. "I'll let you out at the next corner. They won't be looking for a cabby without a fare, so if I go it alone I've got a good chance of getting through. Scatter and make like tourists. I'll see you at the motel Saturday night."

It made sense, and since we didn't have time for a studied evaluation of our position, we jammed the coats and bags under the back seat and bailed out. From there we split, four men going in as many directions.

For the next three days and nights the newspapers and television stations blared forth the details of the daring heist, only now they were citing the amount taken as *two hundred thousand dollars*. That didn't surprise me, though. The loss was covered by insurance, and if the bank could convince the insurance company they really had lost two hundred grand, somebody would be home free with one hundred thousand. The procedure is surprisingly popular among the allegedly honest people.

Harvey appeared on television once and explained to a battery of reporters that the cab used in the heist was nothing more than a gimmick employed by the robbers. He'd been at home at the time, eating an early dinner. Elly May, barefooted and pigtailed, tripped before the cameras to vouch for him. The law bought the story and released Harvey . . . with apologies.

I waited until ten o'clock Saturday night before heading for the motel. Homer was waiting when I got there. Monk showed up an hour later, and Fingers thirty minutes behind him. While we waited, Monk and Homer began their rummy game and Fingers nipped on a fifth of bourbon.

He offered me a drink, but I declined. "I drink only on special occasions, Fingers, remember? *Very* special occasions." After a while I stretched out on the bed. Monk and Homer were good for hours, and Fingers was already dozing in his chair. Sometime past midnight a knock at the door brought me to my feet.

It wasn't Harvey. It was a messenger with a beer case in his hands. "Joey Bond?" When I nodded, he handed me the box. "Compliments of Mr. Plock." Then he moved back along the walk.

Homer eased in close as I opened the box. "Instead of one

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hundred grand we get this contraption. What is it?"

"A tape recorder," Fingers said blankly. "Harvey's sent us a recording?"

I plugged the cord into a wall socket and flipped the switch. At first nobody got it. Then it clicked. We were listening to the police report that had come over the cab radio right after the heist.

"It wasn't a newscast at all," Fingers wheezed. "The rabbit was playing this recording, and we bought it and ran . . ." He stared hypnotically at the spinning reels. "We've been had! Four of the best heistmen in the business have just been heisted."

"I'll murder him, so help me," Homer hissed.

"Just murder half of him," Monk grated angrily. "The rest is mine."

Along with the recorder was a picture of Harvey, addressed to me, and a note for Fingers. Harvey was leaning against a black pickup, a broad smile on his face. In the window was a vague reflection of Elly May holding a camera. Behind the pickup was the convertible I'd stolen for the loan-company heist . . . *Harvey had pinned the convertible in so I couldn't move it!* Then he'd just happened along and rescued me, and his barefoot bride had been in on it! Oh, if he was here now . . .

The note to Fingers was brief and to the point: Fingers, you were wrong. The demand for two hundred grand didn't make anybody suspicious. And you were also right; first-class planning does pay off."

Fingers slumped into a chair, eyes glazed. "I told him a dozen times that going for two hundred grand was putting on the gouge, bound to make somebody suspicious. Only he went for it anyway."

I finally had the whole picture. "And I accused poor Mr. Bright of trying to head south with a hundred grand, never suspecting dear, dear Harvey really did have two hundred thousand."

After a bit Fingers dug a bill out of his pocket and shoved it at Homer. "Go get me a fifth of bourbon. In fact, get two fifths."

The numbness and shock were just wearing off when Homer returned with the booze. "Take a look at that," he growled disgustedly as he threw the morning paper on the bed.

We looked. From the front page Harvey smiled back. Beside him stood Elly May—with shoes on—and the five rug rats. The picture had been radioed in from Nantes, France. The caption related how the Plock family, late of Portland,

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Oregon, was realizing a lifelong dream. The former owner of Tiger Taxi, through shrewd business dealings, and the sale of his taxi business; was spending the winter with his family on the Riviera. There was a mention about the bogus cab being used in the recent robbery, but due to Harvey's sterling character and spotless reputation, he had been quickly absolved.

Fingers reached for one of the bottles. "So the rabbit *really was* a tiger." He downed a healthy shot and immediately poured himself another. "Or was he a cross between the two—like maybe a striped rabbit. That's it. He was a striped rabbit; a real freak that nobody had ever seen before. How were we to know?" After a few more drinks Fingers began to laugh, quietly at first, as if at some private joke, and then louder and louder. Finally he stopped and palmed the tears from his eyes. "Ain't this the damnedest thing? The four of us have driven a dozen police departments and the FBI right outta their skulls . . . and we get taken for a ride by a tangle-footed hack driver! Ouch!"

A half hour later Fingers opened the second bottle. Then he began to laugh again. The humor of the situation was contagious. All four of us roared until we were gasping for breath.

"We can't go after him, either," Fingers said thoughtfully. "We could try, but sure as hell word would get out about what had really happened. We'd be the laughingstocks of two continents and probably never get the money anyway . . . So long, image . . . Nope. We've always been good sports. We put this one down to experience."

"There's a moral to this story?" Monk asked blearily.

Fingers tilted his head back and let a swallow of whiskey trickle over his tonsils. "The moral is: Beware of striped rabbits." He raised his glass unsteadily. "As true gentlemen, the least we can do is toast the ingenuity of the striped rabbit."

Fingers was right, which made it a *very* special occasion.

I reached for the bottle . . .

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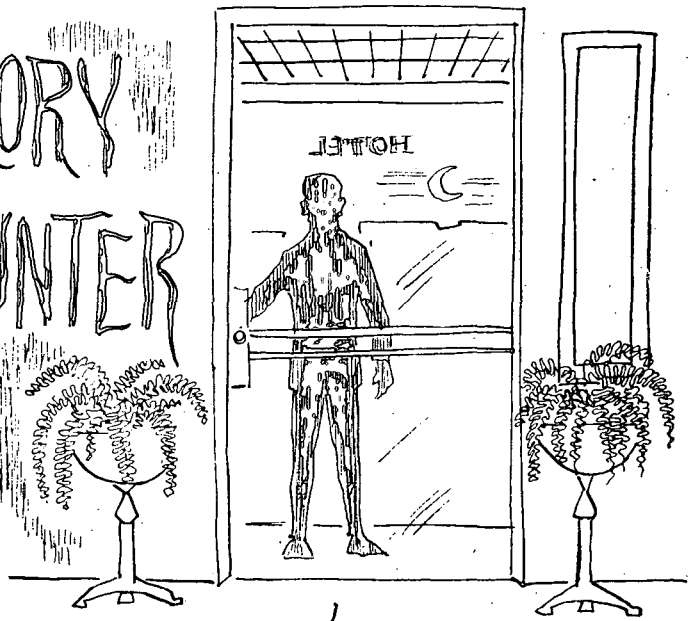
Glory is where one finds it or, as Chaucer expressed it, "Myn be the travaille, and thyn be the glory!"

GLORY HUNTER



by Richard M. Ellis

When the buzzer buzzed at the front entrance, Homer Doyle set down his mug of lukewarm tea—he never drank coffee after midnight—and rose from his chair behind the desk. He crossed the lobby to the heavy glass door and clucked disapprovingly at the young man smiling in at him. He released the latch and pushed the door open a few inches.

"I thought my sister might have turned up," the young man said eagerly. "I know it's late, but—"

"Almost three o'clock in the

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morning," Homer Doyle said with some asperity. "Your sister isn't here. Perhaps she went to some other hotel."

The young man's sandy brows puckered in a frown. "No. She was definitely supposed to come straight here from the airport. I don't understand it."

"She might have met someone on the plane—"

"Oh, no. Betty isn't that kind of girl," the young man said, looking a bit shocked.

Doyle grunted dubiously. He had been night-clerking at the Cragmore, a small hotel for women, more than long enough to decide that almost any girl was that kind of girl. He said, "Well, I'm sorry, she just hasn't shown up. In fact, no one has checked in since you were here earlier."

He started to pull the door shut.

"Could I come in long enough to use the phone?" the young man asked. He gestured to the dark, deserted street stretching into the hot summer night on either side of the Cragmore's lighted entrance. "There doesn't seem to be another place open along here. I want to call the—the police. I really am worried about Betty."

Homer Doyle hesitated.

The Cragmore was run very much like the nearby YWCA; no male visitors were allowed inside the building after midnight, when the front door was locked. "Propriety" and "Cragmore" were synonymous.

Doyle nodded. After all, the boy was obviously only concerned with locating his sister, and there was a phone booth just inside the lobby.

Inside, the young man waited while Doyle shut and locked the door. The rather large lobby was in shadow; the only lights on were Doyle's reading lamp behind the registration desk, and the tiny yellow bulb above the elevator.

"Certainly different from when I was here before," the young man said. "The place was swarming with girls then."

Doyle nodded vaguely. The boy had come in around ten or ten-thirty last night, inquiring for his sister who had supposedly arrived in the city earlier in the evening.

Perhaps she had, but she hadn't checked in at the Cragmore. The young man, who had given his name as Bob Ed Lambeth, had hung around for several minutes with a sort of polite but dogged persistence until Doyle had gone through the registration cards twice with the same result. Finally, after a long look around the then busy lobby, the young man had left.

Now Doyle said, "The phone's over there. I suppose you've

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checked to make sure your sister's plane arrived on schedule last night?"

"What? Oh, yes." Lambeth fumbled in a pocket of his sports jacket. "I think I'll need change."

Doyle sighed and turned toward the desk. He took two steps, and then his head suddenly exploded in a great burst of white light followed by a shower of sparks that died into nothingness.

He woke to find himself in his familiar chair behind the registration desk, but with a most unfamiliar pain throbbing in his head. He groaned and tried to lift his hands. He could not move. He blinked dazedly up into the concerned face of the young man who had wanted to use the phone.

"Thank goodness," Lambeth said. "I was afraid I'd hit you too hard, Mr. Doyle."

"What—"

"Would you like a drink of water?"

Doyle shook his head, winced, and again tried to lift his hands. Then he saw that his arms were bound securely to the arms of the chair, with some kind of heavy cord that also encircled his chest, holding him firmly against the back of the chair.

Lambeth was saying, "I'm sorry I had to slug you but I couldn't be sure you weren't carrying a gun or something. I had to play it safe."

"Gun?" Doyle said dazedly.

"After all, you are down here on the ground floor alone, and there's no house detective or anyone like that in the hotel; just you and the manager, Mrs. McVey, and of course she's fast asleep in her room up on the top floor."

Along with the throbbing in his head Doyle began to feel anger, most of it directed at himself. This kid with his guileless air and fresh-scrubbed face, and his tale of a missing sister, had taken Doyle in completely.

Doyle swore under his breath. Then he glanced toward the small safe set into the wall behind the desk. The safe had been closed, but not locked; now its door was ajar.

Doyle snapped, "I see you've cleaned out the cash box. I hope the fifty bucks you found in there is enough, because that's all there is."

Lambeth didn't appear convinced. "I don't—"

"Of course, I might have all of five dollars in my wallet," Doyle added bitterly.

"Six, as a matter of fact," said Lambeth, with a deprecating smile. "I searched you while you were unconscious. I also found a gun in this little drawer under the counter here. I'll just take that along . . . But I'm really not interested in

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money, or guns. This is what I was looking for."

From the desk he picked up four sheets of stiff paper, floor plans of the hotel, one for each of the four upper floors. Small removable tags indicated which rooms were occupied and which were not.

Doyle stared.

Lambeth said lightly, "No, I'm not still trying to find my sister. Actually, I imagine Betty's sound asleep at this hour, in her own bed at home. Way out in Seattle, Washington. She really did stay here once, though, when she came east on a visit. She told me all about this place. Thought it was very nice. Very quiet and respectable."

Doyle frowned uncertainly at the young man. He noticed that in spite of Lambeth's casual chatter and outwardly calm manner, there was a sheen of perspiration on his face, and his hands holding the floor charts were trembling spasmodically.

"You've got all the cash in the place," Doyle said. "Why are you hanging around?"

"It's not quite three-thirty yet," said Lambeth, nodding toward the wall clock. "There's nothing to do but wait."

"Wait for what?"

Lambeth made an abrupt gesture, as if brushing away the subject. He said, "Do you like this job?"

"Now, listen—"

"It sounds like it would be—interesting. Night clerk in a hotel for women, one man, alone with all these girls. I'll bet you could write a best-selling book about your experiences, huh? Even at your age, it must be interesting."

"Are you kidding?"

Lambeth shrugged, his pale gaze again flicking to the clock. He took off his jacket and folded it neatly over a corner of the desk. There were large blotches of sweat on his blue shirt.

He said, absently, "I suppose if you were the lecherous type, you wouldn't have this job in the first place. Not in a respectable place like this is supposed to be . . . Well, it's almost time. I'll just—"

"Time for what?" Doyle cried. "What the hell is all this?"

As he spoke, Doyle struggled against the cord that bound him to the chair and discovered that there was a certain amount of give in the loops encircling his left arm and the arm of the chair on that side. He immediately stopped his efforts; Lambeth didn't seem to notice.

Lambeth was busy. He had taken off his shirt, and Doyle saw that the young man's naked, hairless chest was covered with curious

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designs done in greasepaint; jagged streaks of red and green radiating from a bright yellow spiral.

Now Lambeth took a tiny mirror and a stick of yellow greasepaint from his trousers pockets and carefully drew crude stars on his clean-shaven cheeks and a sunburst on his forehead. He examined the results and nodded.

Doyle watched, his eyes bulging.

"Just an added touch of business," Lambeth said, with an embarrassed grimace. "It's the kind of thing that goes over big in the newspapers."

"Sure. Uh huh," said Doyle soothingly. Until now he had been more annoyed at his own gullibility than afraid of Lambeth. The kid was hardly the type to inspire terror, but if he was a psycho, that was something else again.

Lambeth eyed the clock. "Three-thirty. Good. That's the time my father died, some years ago. Three-

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thirty on a hot summer morning . . . He died of acute alcoholism, Mr. Doyle. Driven to it by my mother. How does that grab you?"

Doyle tried to moisten his dry lips with a tongue that felt like parched leather. "I—I'm sorry—"

Lambeth burst out laughing. "Don't be. Just between us, my old man died of a coronary, but the other way sounds much more interesting."

"Sure."

"Well, to work," Lambeth said briskly. "I've looked at these floor plans. I believe the top floor is best. I see there are seventeen guests on that floor, most of them in single rooms. That'll make it easier, you know."

"What are you—"

"See, I can go quietly from room to room, using this master key I found in the safe. With just one girl to deal with in each room—except in a couple of cases where there are two—there won't be any unnecessary uproar or bother."

Doyle shook his aching head. He wondered if he might be having some kind of weird hallucination; but the pain was real enough, and so was the needle-pointed ice pick that Lambeth had taken from a sheath attached to his belt.

Doyle sat there, frozen, while the young man tucked the chart of the top floor under one bare arm and with a casual nod walked around the end of the desk and started across the lobby. He was humming softly.

"Wait," Doyle croaked. "Listen, you can't mean—"

"Sure I do," Lambeth said, his face shining with sweat and greasepaint. "What the heck, I'll soon be twenty-four, and who's ever heard of Robert Edward Lambeth? Nobody. But in a few hours, Mr. Doyle—in a few hours I'll be the most famous man in the country—in the world."

"But—"

"I'll be down as soon as possible. Then I'll untie you, and we can call the television stations and the newspapers—and the cops, I suppose." Lambeth grimaced. "Don't worry about a thing, Mr. Doyle. After all, you'll be the man who took my surrender. Wish me luck."

Lambeth reached the elevator and slid open the door. He stepped inside and, with a last cheerful nod, punched the button and the door slid shut.

Whimpering, Doyle strained and tugged at the cord; almost at once his left arm was free.

"My God," he panted. "Seventeen—he'll kill . . ."

Now his right arm was free, and only the cumbersome loops of cord around his chest held him in the

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chair. If he could free himself before the elevator reached the top floor, there was an emergency switch that would override the controls inside the elevator itself, stopping it between floors. If Doyle could just reach that switch in time . . .

He glared across the dim lobby at the indicator above the elevator door. The hand of the indicator was moving slowly past 2 and on toward 3.

Doyle tried to stand up but he was still entangled in the stiff new cord. He groaned.

That psycho would kill those women, one by one, entering their rooms and stabbing them with that ice pick before they knew what was happening, and Doyle had no doubts remaining that Lambeth meant to do just that. Seventeen . . .

It would be the most horrible crime . . .

Lambeth would be famous, all right. Oh, yes!

At last Doyle was able to stand up partially, his eyes glued to the elevator indicator; it had reached 3, and there was only 4—and then 5, the top floor.

There was still time, though. The switch was on a panel in an alcove behind the desk, only a few steps from where Doyle was struggling to push the last loop of the cord down past his hips so that he could step out of it.

Famous? Lambeth would be more than famous. There would be hours of television about him, miles of newsprint devoted to him, magazine articles, books—if Homer Doyle didn't stop him in the next few seconds.

And what about the man who caught Lambeth? Right now it would mean nothing. But afterwards, after seventeen murders . . . That man would be almost as famous as Lambeth!

Doyle stood there in a sudden blinding agony of indecision.

Then, slowly, he sank back into the chair. He stared in fascination at the elevator indicator. Then he slowly pulled the last loop of the cord back up around his waist.

After all, not only the young have dreams of glory.

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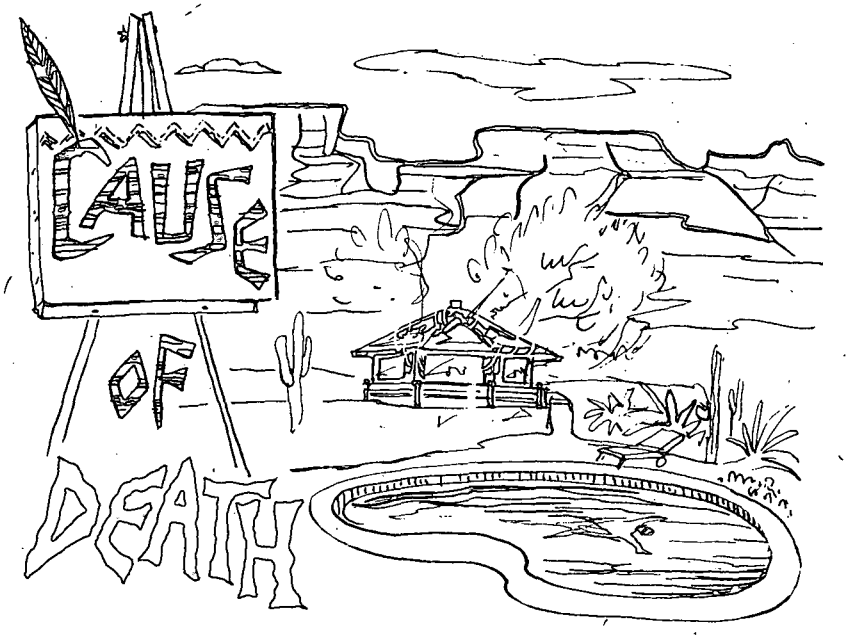
Perverseness, wrote E. A. Poe, is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart.



I BRUSHED AWAY pesky rivulets of desert-hot sweat trickling down into my eyes, rapped the gavel, and faced my twelve good neighbors in the jury box. "An inquest," I explained, "is a judicial inquiry conducted by a coroner—that's me. Together with a jury—that's you-all—we look into the cause of the sudden or violent death of a person." I paused to throw out a lop-sided grin to put them at ease. Serving for the first time, they were all scared stiff.

Off to the right of the jury box, a chair scraped with squeaky impatience and cantankerous old Jake Tobey, representing the insurance company, leaped to his feet. "Let's get on with it!" Jake squealed. "Everybody here knows Miles Rigby committed suicide."

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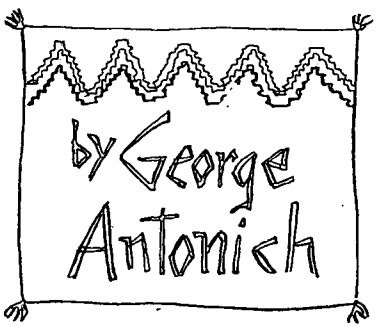
"Mebbe so," I growled. "And then again, mebbe not." My fist tightened on the gavel I would dearly love to jam down his checker-cheating throat. "But even out here in the wilderness, we do have certain formalities that have to be observed."

Jake Tobey mumbled something nasty and sat down. I turned away from him and faced the jury again. Like them, this was my first experience with a coroner's inquest, and I meant to make the most of it. In my dozen years in the community of Indian Springs, the only



deaths had been from natural causes; from old age or, too often, malnutrition in some of the Navajo youngsters.

From the jury box, leather-faced Doke Tinney stood up and shouted, "Is this gonna take long, Chief Many Hats? I got me a flock of sheep needs lookin' after."

I smiled at the nickname the Navajos had bestowed upon me—Big Chief Many Hats. I was as much a chief as a forty-year-old, redheaded Irishman born in Butte, Montana could be, having been handed the honorary title because of my various official and self-imposed duties. For one thing, I was the only doctor between Indian Springs and Fort Defiance. As a result, I'd been appointed coroner. When I wasn't doctoring, coronering, or trying to catch Jake Tobey cheating at checkers, I was a volunteer coach, teaching the kids different sports. On Sunday mornings, after the Bible class in back of Jake Tobey's trading post, I entertained the kids with a moth-eaten old ventriloquist's dummy I'd picked up somewhere.

"Well, how about it?" Doke Tinney insisted.

"It won't take no longer than it has to, Doke." I gave him a dirty look, banged the gavel, and went on with my instructions to the jury members. "In an inquest of this type, witnesses may be summoned and may be compelled to give testimony as to the cause of death. It's our responsibility to determine if the death in this case was accidental, self-inflicted, or otherwise."

Red-faced and shifty-eyed, Jake Tobey was on his feet again like a shot. "I move to have the jury polled right now!" he shouted at me. "After all, Miles Rigby made

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no bones about his intent to commit suicide. He told you about it, and he told his wife."

"Mister Tobey," I said, aiming the gavel at his bullet-shaped bald head, "if you don't shut up and sit down, I'll have you removed and barred from this inquiry! Is that clear?"

Tobey nodded and sat back down, muttering to himself. I wasn't about to bar him. I needed him too much, but he didn't know that. Crazily, I could understand his impatience, and even feel a tiny twinge of pity for him. Besides running the Indian Springs Trading Post, old Jake represented several big mail-order houses, and a large insurance firm in Phoenix. His company stood to lose fifty thousand dollars if Miles Rigby's death was not officially listed as a suicide.

Order restored, I banged the gavel a couple of times just for the sheer joy of it, then called the first witness, Bo Clajinnie. "Patrolman Clajinnie," I began, "will you tell the jury in your own words what happened on the night of Miles Rigby's death?"

Black-haired and pearly-toothed, the handsome young Navajo buck grinned nervously. "I was out cruising in the patrol car," he said, "when the shortwave radio notified me there was some trouble at the Rigby place to investigate."

I held up my hand to silence him momentarily, and grinned at the angry glare I got from Jake Tobey. "Just for the record," I said, deliberately slow, "the Rigby place referred to is some ten miles from here, up toward the main highway. It consists of a curio shop and art gallery specializing in Indian crafts. In back of the main house is a small, kidney-shaped swimming pool. Several hundred feet beyond that is a one-story studio where Miles Rigby did his painting—and sulking."

Tobey was on his feet again. "We already *know* all that!" he exploded. "Why are you stalling?"

Ignoring him, I nodded toward the nervous patrolman. "What did you find when you got there, Bo?"

"The place was a mess!" Clajinnie exclaimed. "The little house in back—the studio—was all in flames, and Miles Rigby was in the swimming pool, floating face down."

"Did you attempt to aid and assist Miles Rigby in any way?"

Clajinnie grimaced, then looked sheepishly down at his highly polished cowboy boots. "No, sir, I didn't." He looked back up then, swallowed hard, and said, "There'd been an electrical storm, and I thought the place'd been struck by lightning."

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There was a low murmur from the crowd, and I waggled my head knowingly. Navajo chindee, or taboo, concerning lightning was as old as the tribe itself. I'd known the Indians to avoid a desperately needed road because an object on it had been struck. In the event of a death by lightning, the body could not be touched for four days.

"I understand, Bo. What happened then?"

Clajinnie gulped gratefully and went on. "Faye Raven—Mrs. Rigby—pulled Miles out of the pool and gave him artificial respiration. But it wasn't no use. He was cold dead. Then we called you."

"You mean, that little woman, weighing all of a hundred pounds soaking wet, pulled Rigby out all by herself?"

Clajinnie nodded. "Yes, sir. I don't know how in hell she done it—but she sure did."

I stalled for a full minute, not wanting to ask the next question, but knowing I had to. "Were you aware that the Rigbys' married life was not, ah—harmonious?"

Jake Tobey was on his feet, yelling, "What kind of a damn fool question is that?"

"An inquiry like this," I snapped, "cannot overlook the possibility of foul play. The sole purpose of this inquest is to determine the cause of death, nothing else."

"Are you hinting at murder?"

I shook my head. "I'm not hinting at anything. I'm merely trying to cover all the angles. Now then, Clajinnie, were you aware of the discord in the Rigby marriage?"

The Navajo's black eyes blazed. "Miles Rigby was a loudmouthed braggart and a sadistic bully. He was born mean as sin and getting meaner every day. I don't know how that sweet little Faye Raven put up with him as long as she did."

"And yet, would you say that Mrs. Rigby did everything in her power to save her husband's life?"

"Yes, sir! I don't know why, but she sure did."

I rubbed my stubbled chin and tried to look owl-wise. "I guess that will be all, Clajinnie. Oh! Incidentally, is it true that you once asked Faye Raven to be your wife?"

The muscular young buck leaped to his feet. For an awesome moment I thought he was going to rush me. Then he regained his composure. "Yes," he admitted. "But I was a wild young punk in those days. She turned me down."

I looked over at Jake Tobey. "Do you have any questions to ask this witness?"

"Not this one," Jake snarled. "Let's just get on to the meaty

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stuff. That's why we're here."

I excused the patrolman and shuffled some papers on my desk, remembering the first time little Faye Raven, frightened and shy, had come to my office. Long before she'd married Miles Rigby, she and her widowed mother managed to scratch out a meager living with only a few puny sheep and some scrawny chickens. Once in a while, when she sold some of her excellent weaving to the tourists, Faye Raven bought painting supplies and poured out her proud Indian heritage on canvas. Miles Rigby had put some of her work on display in his shop and sold it right off. To my way of thinking, the only reason he married her in the first place was to keep from paying her the commissions she'd earned.

I never could understand her reason for marrying him, unless it was a search for security, and an outlet to show off her artistic talents. Whatever it was, she'd picked a hard row to hoe.

Anyhow, Faye Raven had stood in my examining room that day, her lustrous brown doe's eyes crinkled with pain. She'd been beat up something awful, but she denied it. "I fell down while visiting my mother's hogan," she'd lied.

"That's nonsense!" I snapped. "I've seen burros fall down the Grand Canyon and look better than you." I patched her up then and soft-talked her. She took to my gentle words like an orphaned kitten to a saucer of warm milk. "Miles did this to you, didn't he?" I asked when she was calm.

She'd nodded, dropping her eyes in shame at informing on her husband. Angered, I'd asked, "But why?"

"He complains that I am a nag," Faye Raven said, her voice on the near edge of breaking. "But it is not so! I respect my husband very much, and it pains me to see him suffer. He has many blinding headaches, and a terrible racking cough that threatens to choke out his very life, yet he smokes constantly. Whenever I suggest that he give it up to improve his health, he gets furious and immediately smokes more than ever."

"And *that*," I asked, incredulous, "is why he beat you?"

"There was more," Faye Raven said. "I was very unwise. For his own good, I told my husband I wished him to stop smoking because it fouled the air in the house and—and made him offensive to me."

Thunder and lightning! I could just see the conceited, self-styled ladykiller, Rigby, being told he was personally offensive to a mere

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woman. Faye Raven's stock went up ten points in my mind. "Do you want to make a complaint against him for what he did to you?"

Her pretty little face went white. "Oh, no!" she gasped. "He has the right. He is my husband."

"Would you like me to talk to him about it?"

Faye Raven just shook her dark head and fled from my office.

I treated her twice more after that, the last time in answer to a frantic phone call from Rigby, some months later. "You gotta get out here quick!" he yelled. "Faye Raven is in a bad way. She took a nasty fall while out hiking."

I dressed quickly and aimed my jeep toward the Rigby place. Even before I got out there I was convinced she had no more hurt herself hiking than a mountain goat would slip in the Rockies, but I wasn't prepared for his cold attitude when he met me outside. He'd recovered from his first panic on the phone.

"The nagging old squaw's in there!" he snarled, pointing with his shaggy head toward the main house. Rigby was a big man, about my age, with an unruly shock of tangled steel-wool hair greying slightly, and prominent upper teeth protruding like brown, tobacco-stained fangs.

"Aren't you coming in?" I asked as he turned away. "I may need some help in there."

"I've moved all my things to the studio," he snapped. "I'm staying there from now on. If you want anything, call me on the intercom." With that, he whirled and stalked away.

Faye Raven was conscious when I got to her, but just barely. She wasn't seriously hurt, but painfully and thoroughly beat up again. My blood boiled at the sight of her, so small and pitiful and helpless. After I'd cared for her hurts, I took her in my arms, smoothing back her gleaming black hair, and gentling her like you would a skittish mare after a barn fire.

"What brought this one on?" I asked when she was able to talk. "Are you still nagging Miles about his smoking?"

She nodded and managed a weak little grin. "As usual," she said, "it was my fault. I not only nagged my husband, I displeased him in another way. There was an art exhibition in Phoenix that he was eager to win. I sent in his entries and included one of my own." She paused, making a visible effort to square her slim shoulders and to hold up her proud head. "My entry won third prize. Miles' work was rejected."

Thunderation! I could just see

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Rigby's inflated ego being punctured like a pin-stuck balloon. "You're a fool to stay with him," I told her. "One of these days he'll kill you in a terrible temper tantrum."

"I have asked him for a divorce," Faye Raven said softly, "but he refuses to discuss it. He does not want me, but letting me go would make him lose face."

"MISTER CORONER!"

Snapped out of my musings, I looked up to see Jake Tobey, his beefy face turned tomato red, glaring at me. "Iffen you're finished with your little siesta," he said, real sarcastic, "can we get on with this here inquest?"

That was just like old Jake. He did everything exactly like he played checkers—moving recklessly ahead, furiously impatient if I stalled the game to plan my future moves. Still, instead of being angry with him, I felt hopeful. Perhaps I could put his impatience to some good use. I shook my head to clear away the cobwebs of memory, then said, "Just what did you have in mind, Mister Tobey? It's your move."

"You mean, you're gonna let me talk for a change?"

"Of course," I said. "After all, this is more or less an informal hearing. I believe every dog should have his say."

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Tobey stood up, looking as pleased and smug as if he'd just jumped two of my kings. "I'd like to get right to the heart of this here matter," he said pompously. "Since you was Miles Rigby's personal physician, as well as being coroner, I'd like to question you. Is that okay?"

"Fire away," I said.

"Just what was the nature of the illness you was treating Miles Rigby for?"

"In addition to a bad case of emphysema from too much smoking, he was suffering from increasingly frequent headaches."

"Did you determine the cause of them headaches? And if so, please explain it to us."

I nodded. "I could give you the details in four-bit medical terms, but I'll break it down so's even *you* can understand it without straining. Miles Rigby was suffering from a malignant brain tumor that was in an inoperable position."

"Which means—?"

"Which means that Miles Rigby was dying. It was just a matter of a few months."

"What was his reaction when you told him?"

"He didn't believe me. He stormed off to a specialist in Phoenix and had tests made. The city doctor confirmed my diagnosis. Miles Rigby's days were numbered."

"When he found out for sure he was dying, did he continue to come to you?"

"Yes. I administered certain pain-relieving drugs regularly."

"What was his attitude about his coming dea—demise?"

"He was, naturally, very depressed. Too, he was mighty curious about how the end would come. When I told him the drugs would be of little use in easing his pain toward the final stages, he said he'd rather get it over with then and there."

"You mean, he wanted you to put him out of his misery?"

I pumped my head up and down. "Naturally, I refused. Then he said he'd find his own time and place to end it all."

Jake Tobey grinned like he'd somehow outwitted me. "Then there is no doubt in your mind that he meant to commit suicide?"

I held back, not wanting to answer it, but finally I said, "No. There was no doubt. Miles Rigby meant to kill himself."

"Thank you!" Tobey cried, flushed with success. "I don't see no purpose in going on with this here inquiry, do you?"

I shook my head. "Slow down, Jake. You're jumping the gun. We have to have more than that to

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base our verdict on," I told him.

Jake glared at me. "Is it okay if I question Mrs. Rigby?"

I shrugged. I didn't really want to put her through the wringer of Tobey's fumbling questions, but I didn't see how it could be avoided. "Go right ahead," I told him. "We're here to determine the whole truth."

My heart bled a little as Faye Raven came up to take the witness chair. In her wide-flared skirt and dark peasant blouse, with her black-black hair caught up in a beaded mourning headband, she looked so tiny and helpless.

"Mrs. Rigby," Tobey began, "I know this must be painful to you, but we gotta ask some personal questions." He paused to clear his throat and I felt a bit more kindly toward him, seeing he had *some* sensitivity I'd overlooked before.

Mona Lisa calm, Faye Raven said, "Ask anything you like, Mister Tobey. I have nothing to hide."

Reverting to type, Tobey plunged right ahead. "Did you know that your husband planned to kill himself?"

Faye Raven winced slightly, then drew herself regally erect. "Not until the night of his death," she said.

Jake Tobey leaned closer to her. "And how did that come about, may I ask?"

"My husband and I were no longer living as man and wife," Faye Raven said. "He had moved into his studio. On the night of his death, he called me on the intercom and told me he was even then in the process of doing away with himself."

Tobey's eyebrows shot up. "Did he say why he was doing this terrible thing?"

Faye Raven nodded calmly, then dropped her bombshell. "He said he was killing himself so that I would not receive payment of the insurance policy he held with your company."

Jake Tobey's big, flabby mouth dropped open. There was an uneasy stir and a murmur of gasps from the crowd. When he found his voice again, Tobey blurted, "You mean, he didn't have anything else to say in his last moments—only that he didn't want you to benefit from his death?"

Faye Raven lowered her head slightly. "I knew, of course, about his illness, and that his death was inevitable. I also knew that his insurance carried a suicide clause which nullified the policy if he did away with himself."

Even loudmouthed Jake Tobey was temporarily speechless at her frankness. Seconds later, he asked, "Why would he want purposely to cut you off like that?"

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Faye Raven shrugged. "I had done many things to displease my husband," she admitted. "He considered me a nag and an inferior person. I had asked him for a divorce, but he refused me."

I spoke up then. "Mrs. Rigby, did he give any reason for refusing you the divorce?"

She lowered her brown eyes and her gentle voice was a mere whisper. "It was his conviction that I was in love with someone else, and was meeting him secretly. He swore that my lover and I would never enjoy his insurance money, or any alimony I might demand."

"What about the rest of his estate?" I asked. "What were his plans for the house and curio shop?"

"He told me he'd left them to a sister in California."

"Then," I said, "deprived of his insurance, you would be left penniless, is that correct?"

Faye Raven nodded. "Miles told me that I had nothing when I entered the marriage, and that I would have nothing when he died."

It was like pulling teeth, but I had to ask it. "Are you, in fact, in love with someone else—and is that someone Bo Clajinnie?"

Faye Raven's face turned twelve different shades of red. Then she held up her head and said, "No."

"Did you," I persisted, "together with Bo Clajinnie, conspire and plan to kill your husband?"

"No, sir!" she said, loud and clear. "I did not!"

"*If you don't mind*," Jake Tobey snapped, glaring at me, "I'd like to get my two cents' worth in here somewhere!"

"I thought we'd pretty well covered everything with this witness," I argued.

"Not quite!" Tobey said. "I do have one more question. Mrs. Rigby, did your husband tell you straight out that he was going to kill himself?"

Faye Raven met Tobey's unblinking gaze. "While we were speaking on the intercom, Miles told me that he had sealed all the windows and doors, and had turned on the unlighted gas heater."

"Then there's no doubt in your mind that he meant to kill himself, right?"

"Yes," Faye Raven said. "That is right."

Jake Tobey leered at me. "I guess that just about skunks you, *Mister* Coroner!" he bragged. "All your highfalutin theorizing about murder and such, is so much hot air. There should be no question in anybody's mind that Miles Rigby committed suicide."

I waved Faye Raven back to her

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seat in the audience. Then I looked at Jake Tobey. "You really should come in for an eye examination," I told him, purposely baiting him. "You can't even see beyond your big nose."

"I resent that!" Tobey flared. "I was just trying to dig up the real and true facts."

"All right," I said, looking at him but talking for the jury's benefit. "Let's look at the facts. I agree that Miles Rigby meant to commit suicide. Mrs. Rigby's testimony verifies that fact. But do you, Jake, recall *how* he intended to do it?"

"Of course!" Tobey shouted. "He was gonna gas himself!"

"That is correct," I said. "But how do you explain the fact that he was found in the swimming pool? My autopsy fixed the cause of his death as drowning."

"You ain't gonna snooker me with that kind of reasoning!" Tobey yelled. "I figure Miles Rigby chickened out as he waited for the gas to overcome him and he decided to do it a quicker way. I figure he lit himself a match and blew himself to perdition."

"And landed right smack in the middle of the swimming pool," I said. "Is that how you figure it?"

"That," Tobey snapped, "is exactly how I figure it!"

"I have here," I said, holding up a batch of papers, "the sworn statements of Mrs. Rigby, Patrolman Clajinnie, and six others—including myself—who swear there was no other debris in the swimming pool."

Jake Tobey's mouth dropped open. He scratched his head and asked, "What does that mean?"

"That means," I pointed out, "that if Miles Rigby did as you say—that is, if he lit a match and blew himself into the pool—that some unbelievable quirk of fate lifted him, *and him alone,* and blew him into the pool! I mean, you'd think that something else would have blown right along with him, now wouldn't you?"

"It could happen," Jake Tobey said, but there was no real conviction in his voice.

I shook my head. "It could not have happened that way. I have that on the authority of the police and military experts. The explosion was too slight, and the pool too far away from the studio, for anything to have blown into it."

"Then how in hell's name," screeched Tobey, "did Miles Rigby get there?"

I shrugged, then waited for what I thought was just long enough. "Mister Tobey," I asked, "how do *you* figure he got there?"

"He ran there!" Tobey cried. "I figure he did just as I said. He lit a

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match and caused an explosion. His clothes caught fire and he ran to the pool!"

I dropped it on him then. "For what reason, Mister Tobey?"

"Why, to put out the damn flames!" Tobey yelled. Then he stopped, his mouth flapping rapidly as he searched for words to cover up, but it was too late. He'd made his usual impulsively impatient move—just as I'd planned, and hoped, he would.

I felt a small twinge of conscience for using him as I had, but if I'd presented my theory to the jury, they would have said it was the craziest notion I'd ever come up with. I had to have the opposition plant the thought in their minds.

I stood up then and faced my twelve good neighbors in the jury box. "We all," I began, "owe a large vote of thanks to Mister Jake Tobey for clearing up this perplexing puzzle for us. With his usual keen thinking and shrewd analysis of the situation, he figured it right." I finished up with a slight bow toward Jake.

Leather-faced Doke Tinney stood up in the jury box. "Mebbe you know what's goin' on," he said, "but I don't understand a blamed word of it!"

I threw him a patient smile. "Jake was one hundred per cent correct, Doke. Miles Rigby *did* intend to kill himself. He *did* turn on the gas in his studio with that thought in mind. Then, for some unknown reason, he *did* light a match in the gas-filled room. His clothing *did* catch fire. Dazed and confused, Miles Rigby *did* dash to the swimming pool in an effort to put out the flames. Unfortunately, he hit his head on the side of the pool and drowned!"

Doke Tinney scratched at his grey-thatched head. "If that's the case," he said, "then Rigby wasn't tryin' to kill hisself—he was doin' his damnedest to save hisself!"

I pumped my head in agreement. "You're right, Mister Tinney. Miles Rigby's last act was one of self-preservation. No matter what his intentions might have been *only seconds before,* his last and final act on this earth was an attempt to preserve his own life. In my official opinion, that rules out suicide."

Jake Tobey's face was a study in scarlet frustration. It was plain he didn't know whether to bask in the praise I'd heaped on him, or to go on sticking up for the insurance company. Finally he cried out, "Now wait a damn minute—!"

But nobody paid him any mind. The jury didn't even have to leave the box. They took a vote then and there. The unanimous verdict

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was Death by Accidental Drowning.

Later, when Faye Raven and I went to Jake Tobey's office, he stuck out his hand and forced a weak grin. "You sure cleaned my board with that last move," he admitted. "But I guess that fifty thousand dollars won't break the insurance company."

"You'd best study the board again," I told him. "As per usual, you're moving too fast. That's one hundred thousand dollars."

Jake Tobey spluttered, then screamed, "You're out of your mind!"

"Read the policy," I advised him. "There's a double indemnity clause in there in the case of proved accidental death."

Faye Raven came up on her toes and kissed old Jake lightly on the cheek. "I'd appreciate it," she said, "if you would speed up the payment. I have many plans for the money my husband left me."

When we were alone, Faye Raven slumped down into my office chair and began to sob quietly. "I'm so glad it's all over," she said. "It—it's been such a nightmare." She stared straight ahead.

I gathered her up into my arms and soft-talked her. "Don't you fret your pretty little head no more," I told her. "Nobody'll ever mistreat you again. From now on, it's just the two of us."

"I was so frightened," Faye Raven said, gently nuzzling my right ear lobe. "I thought sure Mister Tobey would question me further on my last conversation with Miles . . ."

"Mister Tobey," I said, "is an idiot. Besides, what could he possibly have learned by further questioning?"

"Nothing, I suppose," Faye Raven said. Then she paused and blushed prettily. "Although I would have had to admit that I'd fallen back into my nagging ways with Miles."

"What do you mean?"

Faye Raven smiled. It was an odd sort of smile. I couldn't rightly tell if it was one of regret, or one of great personal satisfaction. "Before Miles turned off the intercom that night," she said, "I couldn't resist warning him for the last time, *not to smoke!*"

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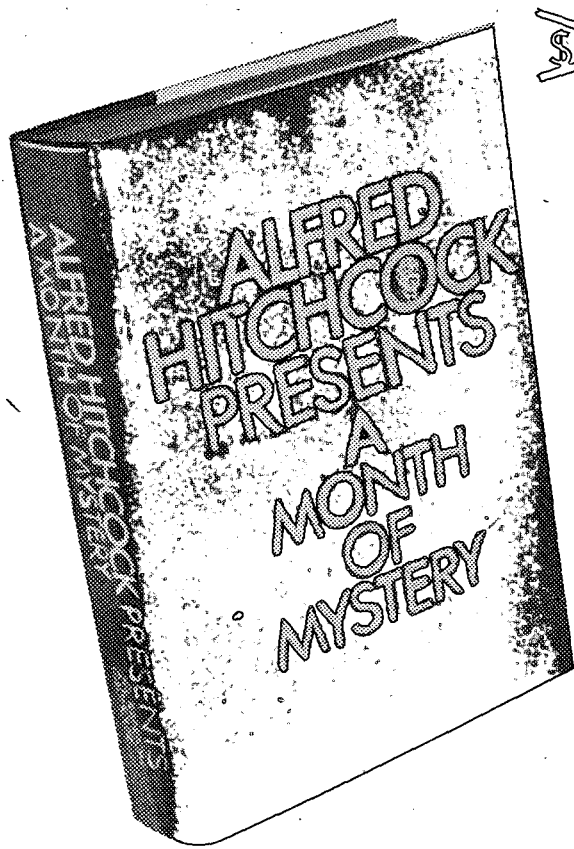

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Plans, like special offers, are subject to change without notice.

WIGMORE, executive vice-president of Great Greengrocers, Inc., addressed his secretary over the intercom. "Miss Dryson."

"Yes, A. C."

"Has that fathead of a detective appeared yet?"

"He's coming along the corridor now."

"Sober, I trust. At any rate, show him in immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"And those figures that came in last night from Store Sixty-six, I want those, too."

"They're right here on my desk, A. C." The voice went a bit off focus. "Good morning, Mister Horner. We've been expecting you."

A moment later Miss Dryson, holding a manila folder to her meager chest, entered Wigmore's office in tandem with Lewis J. Horner, head of Confidential Research Associates.

Horner was hardly anyone's conception of a private detective. Short, portly, with a dozen strands of brownish-gray hair distributed sketchily across his round head, he

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had the bland look one sees in paintings of medieval monks given to cheerful sessions with the grape. The only emphatic feature of his face was the nose, shaped somewhat like a plum and of similar coloration.

Wigmore wasted no words. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere, Horner. It's seven damned weeks since you and your alleged staff started this investigation, and not a single result apparent to date."

"My dear man," Horner said in a surprisingly low, mellifluous voice, "what is not yet apparent to you may be quite apparent to us."

"Don't give me that line again, Horner. The president and the board of directors aren't buying it. All they see now—and I can't help but agree—is that Store Sixty-six is being systematically robbed of thousands of dollars a week and you and your men are unable to find the leak."

"We may give the impression of inactivity," Horner said, smacking his lips, "but beneath this illusion we are extremely thorough. Our reputation is proof of this."

"Your weekly statement for services rendered is thorough," Wigmore said. "And mighty prompt too. As for the expense account that accompanies it, a few of its outlandish items are causing certain board members to wonder if your purpose here is to plug a leak or to create another."

Horner chuckled quietly. "To allay all such future speculation, Wigmore, I think I can now safely promise an imminent solution of your problem."

"Good. Give me an inkling."

"In short order. But first I suggest you send for a floor plan of the store under surveillance—an operational floor plan."

"Miss Dryson."

"Yes, A. C., I'll call Engineering immediately." Handing her boss the manila folder, Miss Dryson left.

A brief silence descended like a blanket woven from chain mail. Horner bettered the moment by finding and sitting in the second most comfortable chair in the room. Wigmore, appearing uncomfortable in the best chair, finally opened a copperish humidor on his desk, took out a long fat cigar and wordlessly offered another to Horner.

"I don't smoke," Horner said. "But I'll accept a glass of cream sherry if you have it."

"I don't drink during business hours," Wigmore said, biting the end off his cigar. Then he turned his full attention to the manila folder. "These are the latest profit and loss figures from our newest and largest market—with a strong

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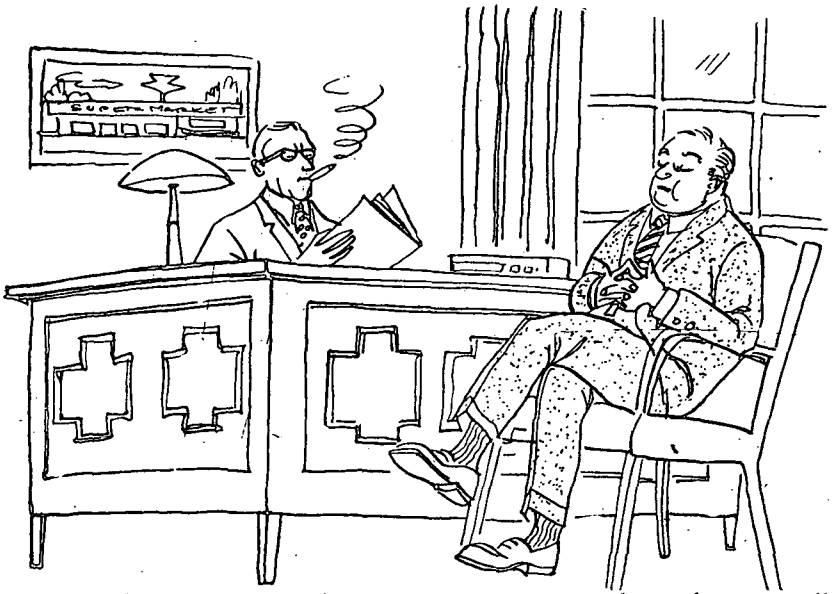

accent on loss—as you will see."

Horner had closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing.

"Would you like to hear a few salient facts?" Wigmore asked, vexed.

"I'm listening," Horner replied from behind shut lids.

"Well, this week our loss leader was a special on frozen turkeys. Twenty-nine cents a pound."

"I bought one myself," Horner said with quiet satisfaction.

"Good for you. Anyway, we shipped fifteen hundred of these birds to Store Sixty-six. The retail value was estimated at six thousand, five hundred and twenty-five dollars. As you know by now, all specials are assigned a code symbol which appears opposite the amount of the sale on the cash-register tapes. In the case of the turkeys the symbol was an asterisk."

Horner dozed on.

"If we ever needed additional evidence of the ineptitude of your so-called investigation," Wigmore continued in a voice barely under control, "we have it in hand now. The tapes from the twelve registers at the checkout counters show a sale of only one thousand three hundred and thirty-two birds. Are you able to draw a conclusion from this figure, *Mister* Horner."

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"The most obvious conclusion is that a hundred and sixty-eight birds are unaccounted for."

"Precisely."

"Of course they weren't in the remainder inventory?"

"There *was* no remainder inventory. The special was a sellout. Not a turkey was left. But one hundred and sixty-eight were not paid for, Horner. How do you account for that?"

"Quite easily, I believe."

"Is that so? Well, edify me a bit. Explain to me, if you can, how anybody could walk out with more than a ton of turkeys and not be observed by one of your eagle-eyed operatives?"

"Also easily explained," Horner said, opening his eyes. "As soon as Miss Dryson returns with the floor plan, I think I'll be able to verify my deductions."

Wigmore peered narrowly at the detective. "You mean you really think you know who's behind this systematic thievery?"

"We've known that almost from the beginning," Horner said.

"Then why in hell didn't you nail him?"

"We didn't know *how* he was doing it. After all, when a man is consistently stealing about three thousand dollars a week, and right under the noses of three of my best undercover men, we like to discover the trick he's been pulling."

"Who is this magician? Can you tell me that?"

"The manager."

"Jorgenson. I can't believe it. He's been with us for nearly twenty years."

"Perhaps that explains something," Horner said.

"Meaning exactly what, Horner?"

"Twenty years is a long time to wait to become a store manager."

"He wasn't really ready until now."

"The personnel files contradict you there, I'm afraid. For a long time Jorgenson's immediate superiors have been rating him as fully qualified for store management. In fact, he was first in line for the last several openings until you intervened in behalf of your deserving relatives."

"You're a sassy cuss, Horner."

Mirth twinkled in the detective's eyes but he said nothing.

"Anyway, when I finally made Jorgenson manager I seem to have made a mistake. How did he think he could get away with it? Going into a new store and stealing at that rate right from the beginning? He must have known he'd be suspected and watched."

"His method gave him confidence. He felt it would be foolproof for a certain period of

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time, I imagine, and he wanted only enough time to amass a little capital for a venture of his own. Within a few more weeks, I think, Jorgenson's resignation would have been forthcoming, based probably on the very fact that he was under suspicion and found the suspicion intolerable."

At that moment Miss Dryson reappeared with a roll of blueprint.

Horner got to his feet, murmuring politely, and took the roll and unrolled it on Wigmore's desk. He studied it for half a minute, then grinned happily. "Ah, clever. Most simple and clever."

"Out with it, man," Wigmore said impatiently.

Horner continued to grin. "One of the ironies here, Wigmore, is that you held the key to the riddle every time you told me about the symbol on the cash-register tapes."

"How's that?"

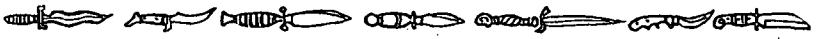
"You always referred to *twelve* registers, *twelve* checkout counters."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, if we go by this floor plan. For here, too, I see *twelve* registers and *twelve* checkout counters. But yesterday morning, as I stood in a line of housewives with my frozen turkey, I began an idle count of the checkout counters and they added up to *thirteen*. Immediately I realized where the leak was. Sometime and somehow, before the grand opening of Store Sixty-six, Jorgenson had set up his own register and checkout counter."

"Well, I'll be a blue-eyed obscenity," Wigmore said.

"I dare say."



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Most sincerely,

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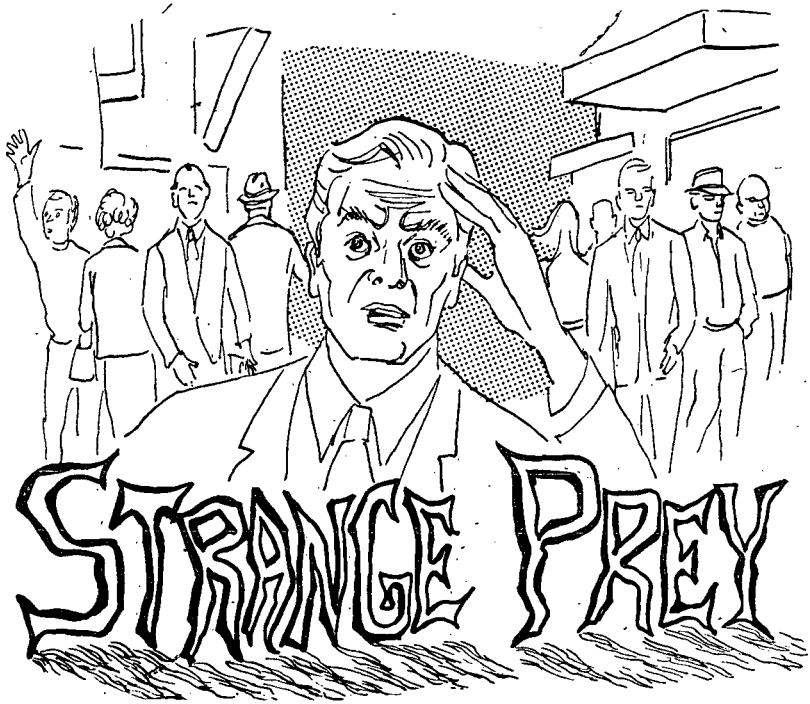
Man decrees that awesome forces are to be harnessed, but such a force may have a will of its own.

IT IS MOST DIFFICULT to know to whom we are speaking; in this troubled world the Civilized and the Savage wear identical trappings." *Sentor Thaag, speaking before the U.N. General Assembly.*

It was starting again; someone was near.

Victor Rafferty looked up from the milky-blue water in time to see a squat, balding man with a limp emerge from the locker room at the opposite end of the pool. The man knelt clumsily in the gutter and grunted as he splashed handfuls of the cold water into his armpits and across his hairy chest.



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Rafferty frowned with displeasure and stared down into the water at his own legs with their large, jagged patches of fish-white scar tissue that registered neither heat nor cold. He knew, of course, that the athletic club was open to any of its members at any time; yet this man had chosen a piece of the afternoon that Victor had come to think of as his own. The pool was usually deserted at this hour, enabling Victor to swim endlessly back and forth rebuilding his damaged body, savoring the silence in his mind that came only

when he was alone and at peace.

There wasn't any pain yet. The man was still too far away. Now there was only the familiar pressure in Victor's ears as if he were ascending in a plane, an agonizing buzzing sound that seemed to emanate from a vast, dark abyss somewhere behind his eyes.

The man was swimming in Victor's direction, struggling through the water with a ragged crawl. He drew closer, and Victor pressed his fingers hard against the chlorine-bleached tiles as the noise and pressure were suddenly transformed into a needle-strewn veil that seemed to float beneath his skull, lancing his brain as it closed around his mind. *It is so much worse with strangers,* he thought as he waited for knowledge of the man, which he knew would come next.

"Swimming," the man said, spewing water and blowing hard. He was hanging onto the edge of the pool, a few inches away from Victor. "Best all-'round conditioner there is. A man can't do enough of it."

Victor smiled and nodded through a haze of pain. The man pushed off the side and began to swim back toward the shallow end. Immediately the pain began to recede until finally there was only the residue of pressure and buzzing.

by George C. Chesbro

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Rafferty knew the man was an accountant, suffered from hypertension, and had a headache that had been with him since early in the morning. He was also worried about his wife.

Madness, Victor thought grimly, rising and reaching for his towels.

He paused inside the locker room and stared at his naked image in one of the full-length mirrors that lined the walls. At forty, he was neither exceptionally handsome nor vain. It was not narcissism that held him motionless before the glass but rather fascination with the structure reflected there, the structure that housed his being; a body that should have been, by all the laws of probability, destroyed in the automobile accident four months ago. His hair was grayer now, and he was still too thin, but the swimming should remedy that; Roger had said so. At least he was alive.

But was he *well?*

Rafferty stepped forward so that his face was only a few inches from the glass. He reached up with his hand and slowly separated the hairs on the right side of his scalp to reveal a long, thread-thin scar that began an inch above the hairline and snaked down and along the side of his head and around to the base of his skull. He touched the wound, pressing on it with the tips of his fingers, first gently and then with increased pressure. There was no pain; there was hardly any sensation at all. Roger and his team had done a beautiful job inserting the steel plate.

No, it was not the wound or the piece of metal that was causing the agony. He was fairly certain of that now. Other people; *they* were the source of his pain. In which case, Victor mused, he must indeed be going mad.

He stepped back but continued to gaze at his flat, scarred reflection. Perhaps it would have been better to die; better that than to suffer this ruptured consciousness that warped his senses and made even the close physical presence of his wife a fount of unbearable discomfort. Too, it was getting worse; his *awareness* of the man in the pool had been sharper, more distinct than ever before.

He knew now he should have told Roger about the pain and the images from the beginning. Why hadn't he? Victor wondered. Was it possible that he was so afraid of discovering the truth that he would wrap himself in his own silence before allowing himself to be told that his brain was permanently damaged . . . or that he was dying? Or was it a different fear, this ten-fingered hand that

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clawed at the inside of his stomach every time he even considered describing to anyone his symptoms?

Victor forced himself to walk away from the mirror. Then he dressed quickly. He lighted a cigarette and was not surprised to see that his hand was trembling. He was due in Roger's office in half an hour and he had decided to tell Roger everything, ignoring the possible consequences.

Victor wondered how the neurosurgeon would react when he was told his famous patient thought he could read minds.

It came as always; tongues of molten metal licking the scorched, exhausted sands of his mind; dagger thrusts that bled into a psychic pool of images and sounds that he could *feel* as well as hear as he approached the woman behind the desk.

"Dr. Burns will see you in a few moments," the receptionist said in her most professional tone. She'd spoken those words to him at least forty times in the last four months and her tone never changed. "If you'll be kind enough to go in and sit down . . ."

Victor thanked her and walked the few paces down the corridor into the large waiting room with its magenta walls and overstuffed, red leather chairs. He selected a magazine from a mahogany rack and tried to focus his attention on the lead article while waiting for the man who could hold the key to his sanity—or his life. He had barely enough time to finish the first paragraph before there was the soft click of a door opening and Victor looked up at the tall, lean frame of the man who had put his body back together after the accident. Roger was studying him through large, steel-rimmed eyeglasses that made his thin face seem all out of proportion.

"Come in, Vic," the doctor said at last, motioning Victor into a huge, book-lined office. "It's good to see you; first interesting case I've had all day."

Victor strode quickly into the office, avoiding the other man's eyes. He automatically stripped to his shorts and sat down on the long, leather examination table. He studied Roger as the doctor glanced through the reams of charts and other papers that were the record of Victor's recovery.

He'd known Roger Burns for some time, even before the accident. In fact, he had designed the award-winning house in which Roger and his wife lived. He knew Roger to be—like many great men—lonely and estranged, the victim as well as possessor of prodigious skills. Victor could understand that. Still, he resented the

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cold, clinical detachment which Roger brought to this new doctor-patient relationship, an attitude which he knew was prompted by Roger's concern about his condition. Victor would have discerned this even without the flood of anxiety that flowed from the other man's mind; it was written in his eyes. He'd probably been talking to Pat.

"How was your walk?" Roger had risen from the desk and walked across the room to a huge bank of filing cabinets. He drew a bulging file from one of the sliding drawers and began clipping X-ray negatives along the sides of a huge fluoroscope suspended from the ceiling.

"I didn't walk."

Roger's eyes flicked sideward like a stroke from one of his scalpels. "You should walk. The exercise is good for you."

"I've been swimming."

Roger nodded his approval and walked toward Victor, who lay back on the table and closed his eyes against the sudden onrush of pain.

"Elizabeth is giving a cocktail party Friday evening for one of the new congressmen," Roger said, glancing back over his shoulder at one of the X rays. "You and Pat be sure to be there. I'll need someone to talk to."

Victor grunted as the surgeon's long, deft fingers probed and pulled at the muscle and bone beneath the fresh scar tissue on his arms and legs. Roger was bent over him, following the path of the thin, bright beam of light that was lighting the interior of his eyes.

Victor reached out and touched a thought. "Why are you thinking that my intelligence may be impaired?"

There was a sudden wave of anxiety that flowed across his mind like a cold wave as Roger shut off the light and straightened up.

"What makes you think I consider that a possibility?" Roger's voice was too tight and controlled.

Victor stared hard into the other man's eyes, very conscious of the beads of sweat that were lining up like soldiers across his forehead. There would never be a better time. "Just guessing," Victor said at last. The words tasted bitter on his tongue and he felt empty inside. "What *do* you think?"

The light came back on and the examination continued. Victor fought to keep his mind away from the pain and the noises.

"You're a walking miracle," Roger said, resuming his probing, and Victor swallowed a bubble of hysterical laughter that had suddenly formed in his throat. "I don't have

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to tell you how lucky you are to be alive. How many men do you know who've had half their skull crushed and lived to worry about their intelligence?" He paused and seemed to be waiting for some reply. Victor said nothing.

"Your most serious injury was the damage to your brain," Roger continued matter-of-factly. "You're obviously aware of that."

"And?"

"I don't know. Really. There's so little that we actually know for certain about this kind of injury. It's still much too early to know for sure how any of your functions are going to be affected." Roger hesitated, trying to read the expression on Victor's face. "I'm not putting you off," he said very quietly. "I really don't know. Every rule in the book says that you should be dead or in the terminal stage of coma."

"I owe my life to you," Victor said evenly, noticing the slight flush that appeared high on the cheeks of the other man. In a moment it was gone. "I think there's something you're not telling me."

"Pat tells me that you seem . . . *distracted* lately." Roger had returned to his desk and was writing something on one of the charts in his folder. "She says you've become very absentminded. I understand you haven't even been . . . close . . . with her since the accident."

"You need a record of my love life?"

"No," Roger said, suddenly slapping the folder shut. "I need information. That is, I need information if I'm ever going to answer your questions. Have you lost the desire to make love?"

"No," Victor said, searching for the right words. How could he explain how it hurt his *mind* to be so close? "I've been . . . upset . . . worried. You can understand that." He hurried on, conscious of the rising note of impatience in his voice, eager to leave the subject of his relationship with his wife. "You must know what parts of my brain have been damaged. And you must know what happened to others with the same kind of injury."

Roger was preparing to take X rays. Victor rose from the couch and walked to the machine.

"Much of the left cortex has been destroyed," Roger said. His voice was low, muffled by the lead shield and punctuated by the intermittent buzzing of the machine at Victor's head. "Usually, the patient dies. If not, there is almost always a loss of coordination and speech. For some reason that I don't pretend to understand, you don't seem to have suffered any appreciable loss of any kind. Of course

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there's no way of knowing what damage has been done farther down in the brain tissue."

"You mean I could drop dead at any moment. Or I could be losing my mind."

The machine continued to click, recording its invisible notes. "I can tell you this: neurosurgeons all over the world are following your case. You may or may not be the world's greatest architect but you're certainly the leading medical phenomenon."

Victor swallowed hard. "I—I wasn't aware that many people knew anything about it."

Roger came out from behind the shield and repositioned the machine. "I haven't published anything yet although, eventually, I'd like to if you'll give your consent. I need your permission, of course. I'll need more time to run tests and chart your progress."

"How did it get so much publicity?"

Roger looked surprised. "Vic, there isn't a major city in the world that doesn't have one of your buildings. You're like public property. Then there was the fantastic way you recovered from the injuries. Didn't you suppose people would be interested?"

"It never occurred to me . . ." Victor's voice trailed off, stifled by the thought of a world watching his disintegration; cold, dispassionate men examining him like a worm wriggling beneath a microscope. The machine had stopped. "Roger, I think I can read people's minds."

His voice seemed swallowed up by the large room. There was the sharp click of a match as Roger lighted a cigarette. The surgeon's face was expressionless.

"I tell you I can *hear* people *thinking*," Victor said too loudly. He took a deep breath and tried to fight the panic he felt pounding at his senses like some gigantic fist. He searched Roger's face for some kind of emotion, but there was nothing; the other man was staring intently at a thin stream of smoke that flowed from his mouth. "It's true. I know it sounds crazy—maybe it *is* crazy—but I can feel you inside my mind right now."

"Can you tell me what I'm thinking?" Roger's tone was flat. He had not raised his eyes.

"It's not always like *that*," Victor said quietly. He knew . . . and then he didn't know; not for certain. He knew it seemed as if he had been challenged and was coming up empty. Still, he felt more relaxed and at peace than he had for months; at last he had invited someone else to peer into his private hell. "It's not always definite

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words or sounds. Sometimes it's just a jumble of sensations. But they're not a part of *me*. Can you understand that? It's like I'm listening in on other people's conversations with themselves!" Victor paused and waited until Roger's eyes were locked with his. His voice gathered strength. "Right now you're fascinated; you'd like to pinpoint the damaged area of my brain that's causing me to hallucinate. You don't believe a word I'm saying."

There was the slightest flicker of surprise and consternation in the doctor's eyes. It was quickly masked.

"Let's not worry about whether or not I believe you," Roger said. "At least not right now. It's obvious that you *believe* you're reading other people's thoughts, and that's all that's important. Why don't you describe these sensations?"

"I'm not sure exactly when it started," Victor said slowly, taking a cigarette from the pack on Roger's desk and carefully lighting it. His hand was steady. "A week, maybe two weeks after I got out of the hospital. I began getting these headaches; but they *weren't* headaches, not in the usual sense, and God knows I'd had enough real headaches to know the difference. And there were noises that would suddenly spring up from nowhere. Sometimes there were words, but mostly it was just noise, almost like . . . static. And it hurt.

"It took me a while to realize that I experienced the pain and the noises only when I was near other people. I'd walk up to people and immediately there'd be pressure in my ears and behind my eyes. I'd walk away and it would stop. Lately, I've *seen* whole strings of words in my mind, words and sounds all floating around in my head. And pain that I can't describe to you. And I *feel* things—emotions—that I know come from somebody else."

"Has there been any change in the *way* you feel these things?" Roger's voice was even.

"Yes. The impressions are stronger, and the pain is worse. The more I know, the more I hurt."

"And you think these sensations have something to do with the thought patterns of other people?"

"I don't know what else to think," Victor said hesitantly. He was conscious now, more than ever, of how sick and foolish he must sound. The words were coming harder; he was pushing them out of his throat. "A few minutes ago, while you were leaning over me on the table, I thought my

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head would split. I kept *feeling* the word, *intelligence*. Over and over again: *intelligence, intelligence*. In some way that I can't explain, I knew that was *your* thought. You were wondering how much my intellectual capacity had been impaired by the accident."

Victor watched Roger light another cigarette. Now it was the surgeon's hands that trembled.

"Go on."

"It's like the words have teeth. There's just no other way I can think of to describe it; they sit in my mind and they *bite*. And just before they come there's a kind of pressure, a buzzing . . . a *numb* feeling." Victor hesitated. "All right," he said at last, "you still don't think it's possible. For a moment there, you were almost convinced; you were thinking about the Russian claim that they have a woman who can read colors with her fingertips."

Again Roger's eyes registered surprise but he spoke without hesitation. "Let's be realistic," Roger said, leaning close, inundating Victor with his thoughts. "It's *most* important that we be realistic. You've survived a terrible injury and it's to be expected that there's going to be some residual pain. You must understand that the mind plays tricks, even in a healthy individual, and you're still far from well. You're going to have to give your body, and your mind, time to *heal*. That's what you have to think about, Victor; that and only that."

"Test me!" Victor was surprised at the vehemence in his voice. It had cost him a great deal to come to Roger with his fears. He would not now be denied; one way or the other he would know the truth. "If you're so sure I'm imagining this, test me!"

"Victor, as your doctor, I—"

"Do it as my friend! Roger, I *need* this! Have you ever read anything about ESP?"

"Well, naturally, I've read the literature. But I don't think—"

"Good! Then you know the tests are fairly simple as well as statistically reliable. There isn't that much work involved."

"It's not the work that I'm thinking about," Roger said. He was wavering now, torn by uncertainty that was clearly communicated to Victor. "Maybe next week."

"Tonight!" Victor had to struggle to keep from shouting. He was intoxicated with the vision of an end to his nightmare. "You won't help me to relax by forcing me to wait a week," Victor said quietly. "It won't be difficult to get the materials or set up the equipment. If I fail, well, I'll have all

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the time in the world to relax. Isn't that right, Roger?"

Victor gazed steadily back into the eyes of the tall man. "All right," Roger said, picking up Victor's folder and tucking it under his arm. "Tonight."

Victor paused in the lobby of the medical center and studied the knots of people moving past, crowding the sidewalk on the other side of the thick, glass doors. All his anger had been drained. In a few hours he would do battle with his fears in the neutral territory of a laboratory before the disinterested eyes of a man who believed he was hallucinating. It was all he asked. The tension and anxiety that had been steadily building over the long months was suddenly gone and in their place was an insatiable curiosity. Talking to Roger had brought him out of himself; his words had lanced the psychic wound that had festered in his silence. He was sure now that the sounds and images were real. Since he was not hallucinating, there was only one other possibility; he was telepathic.

Telepath; Victor rolled the word around in his mind, speaking it softly with equal parts fear and fascination. What if he could learn to control and interpret these sensations?

Victor pushed open the doors and strode out into the auburn glow of the late afternoon, plunging without hesitation into a small crowd of pedestrians who were waiting on the corner for the traffic light to change. Quickly, like a man pitching his body into an icy lake, Victor opened his mind and extended it out toward the man standing next to him. He remembered the time as a child when he had sought to prove his courage to a group of older boys by holding his arm over a camp fire, holding it there until the soft down on his flesh had shriveled and fallen to the ground. It was like that now; his mind was suspended in the consciousness of another and he was burning. Still he hung on, struggling to stretch the words into sentences and trace the images and sounds to their source. A shaft of pain tore through him, erupting like a geyser.

Victor staggered back against a building, ignoring the frightened stares of the people at the crossing. The man whose mind he had touched was holding his head in his hands; he had dropped the briefcase he had been holding and was looking about him with a dazed expression. Victor pushed away from the stone facade and forced himself to walk the few paces to a phone booth which

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stood empty across the street. He half-stumbled into the glass enclosure and slammed the door shut behind him.

Icy sweat had pasted his clothes to his body. Victor rested his head against the cold metal of the telephone and peered out from his sanctuary as he waited for the scream inside his head to subside. He had seen something inside the man's mind, something cold and dark which he did not understand and which frightened him; this time he had seen what before he had only felt.

I must practice, Victor thought; *I must delve even deeper into this mysterious awareness which I now possess. Perhaps, in time, I could even learn to control the pain.*

He hunted in his pockets for change, having decided to call Pat and tell her he would not be home for dinner, not until after he had seen Roger. Right now there was no time to waste; there was too much to learn.

Roger hesitated with his hand on the telephone as he tried to dispel a lingering uneasiness about the call he had decided to make. He finally picked up the receiver, dialed a number and spoke in quiet earnestness for some minutes. When he had finished he poured himself a tall drink from a bottle that had been a Christmas present and which had been around the office, unopened, for the past two years. He ground his knuckles into his eyes and groaned as pools of electric, liquid light darted and swam behind his eyelids.

Acting on an impulse, he had gone ahead and developed the latest series of X rays, the set he had taken of Victor's skull earlier in the afternoon. He had not expected to find any significant change. He had been wrong. Now the entire surface of the large fluoroscope in his office was covered with negatives arranged in chronological order so as to provide, at a glance, a complete visual record of X-ray exposures taken over the past four months. Viewed in this manner, the effect was astounding.

On the left were the plates taken soon after Rafferty had been rushed to the hospital, more dead than alive. The carnage on the right side of the skull was indicated most vividly by small dots of light in a sea of gray, bits of bone imbedded deep in the tissue of the brain.

The next series of plates had been exposed three days later, after the marathon operation had been completed. The splinters of bone had been removed from the brain tissue and a metal plate inserted

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into the area where the skull had been pulverized. The rest of the exposures had been taken at two to three week intervals.

Now that he knew what he was looking for, Roger realized that the effect was evident, even in the early exposures: a tiny discoloration a few millimeters to the left of the injured area. Placed side by side, the plates offered conclusive evidence that the discolored region was rapidly increasing in size. It was almost as if the machine were not recording this area, but Roger had checked and rechecked the equipment and there was nothing wrong with it.

In the set of plates taken that afternoon the normal skull and brain tissue patterns were virtually nonexistent; the entire plate exploded in rays of light and dark emanating from that same tiny region just below the steel plate. It was as if the architect's brain had somehow been transformed into a power source strong enough to interfere with the X rays—but that was impossible.

Roger licked his lips and swallowed hard but there was no moisture left in his mouth. He turned off the fluoroscope and reached back for the wall switch before pouring himself another drink. In a few minutes there was the soft ring of chimes in the outer office. Roger glanced at his watch and rose to greet the first of the evening's two visitors.

Victor knew immediately that something had happened in the past few hours that made Roger change his mind; he could sense the excitement radiating from the mind of the neurosurgeon in great, undulating waves.

"Tell me again how you feel when you experience these sensations." Roger's voice was impassive but his eyes glowed.

"Something like a second-grader trying to read Ulysses," Victor said easily. "You can recognize a few words but most of the time you haven't any idea what they mean."

His gaze swept the small anteroom where Roger had brought him. Shipping cartons, boxes of records, and obsolete equipment had been pushed back against the walls to make room for the two wooden tables that had been placed in the middle of the floor. Wedged between the tables and extending about four feet above their surfaces was a thin, plywood partition. On one table was what appeared to be a large stack of oversized playing cards, a pad and a pencil. The other table was bare.

"I want you to sit here," Roger said, indicating a chair at one end of the empty table. He waited un-

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til Victor had seated himself. "I believe you may have been telling the truth this afternoon. Now I think we can find out for sure."

Victor felt as if he had been hit in the stomach. A few hours ago he would have given almost anything to hear Roger speak those words; now they stirred a reservoir of fear. He might have risen and left if it were not for the knowledge that, by doing so, he would be cutting himself off from the one person who might be able to return him to the world of normal sights and sounds.

"Let me show you what we're going to do," Roger said, fanning the cards out, face up, in front of Victor. They were pictures of farm animals. "I'm going to try to duplicate some of Duke University's experiments in parapsychology. There are figures on my pad which correspond to the pictures on the cards. Each time I turn over a card I'll signal with this," and Roger produced a small, toy noisemaker from his pocket and pressed it several times. It emitted a series of distinct clicking noises. "You'll tell me whatever it is you see or feel: dog, horse, cat or cow. At the end, we'll compute the number of correct responses. Any significant difference between your score and what is considered *chance* must be attributed to telepathy. It's as simple, or complex, as that."

"Fine. Just as long as it helps you to treat me."

"Victor," Roger said, shooting him a quick glance, "do you realize what it would mean for you to be proved telepathic?"

"Right now it means that I have a constant headache, occasional severe pain, and that I continually find myself knowing things about other people that I neither want, nor have the right, to know."

"Yes." Roger's voice was noncommittal. He disappeared behind the partition and Victor could hear him shuffling the cards.

It suddenly occurred to Victor that the other man was trying to hide something from him, concentrating hard on a set of words in what seemed an effort to mask an idea; the thought of *hiding* was floating in the other man's consciousness, soaring above and hovering over the other things on which he was concentrating. Why should Roger want to hide anything from him? Victor attempted to break through the curtain but Roger's will, and the pain, were too great. Victor let go and leaned back in the chair.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready."

Click.

". . . Dog." He said it with far

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more certainty than he felt; there was nothing there.

Click.

. . .

"You're waiting too long."

"I can't . . ."

"Your first reaction!"

Click.

Victor said nothing. There were no animal words in Roger's thoughts. The words that were there were scrambled and totally unrelated to one another. Why would Roger want to ruin his own experiment? Unless there were no words except those that sprang from his own shattered imagination; unless he had been right in the beginning to suspect he was on the verge of madness.

Clickclickclick.

. . .

"You're not responding, Victor! Tell me what animal you see! Tell me!"

Nerves shrieking, Victor sprang from his chair and stepped around the partition, slapping at the cards, strewing them over the table and floor. Sweat dripped from his forehead and splattered on the wooden surface, their sound clearly audible in the sudden silence. Victor stepped back quickly, profoundly embarrassed. Roger was studying him quietly.

"I—I can't see anything," Victor said, his voice shaking. "For God's sake, Roger, I . . . I'm very sorry."

"Let's try it once more."

Victor reached for his handkerchief and then stopped, his hand in mid-air; there was a new emotion in the other man, almost a sense of elation. He waited for Roger to look up, but the doctor seemed intent on rearranging the stack of cards, pointedly ignoring Victor's questioning gaze. Victor returned to his chair and sat down.

"Ready?"

"Ready," Victor said weakly, cupping his head in his hands. He suddenly felt very tired.

Click.

Victor slowly dropped his hands away from his head; his heart hammered. "Dog," he whispered.

Click.

"Cat."

Now the clicks came faster and faster, and each one was accompanied by a clear, startling, naked impression. It was *there!* Roger's mind was open and Victor barked out the words as the images came to him.

Click.

"Cow."

Click.

"Dog."

Clickclickclick.

"Cowcatdog."

Clickclickclickclick.

Finally the clicking stopped. Victor could feel Roger's mind begin

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to relax and he knew it was over. He sat very still, very conscious of his own breathing and the rising excitement in Roger as the results were tabulated. In a few moments the excitement had risen to a sharp peak of unrelieved tension. Victor looked up to find Roger standing over him, his facial muscles hanging loose in undisguised astonishment.

"One hundred percent," Roger said breathlessly, repeating the figure over and over as if unable to accept his own calculations. "Victor, you *can* read minds. You're telepathic to an almost unbelievable degree. Here, look at this!"

Victor glanced at the pad on which his responses had been recorded. On the first test he had scored about one correct answer in every four. *Chance*. On the second test all of the answers were circled in red; the marks grew darker and more unsteady as they proceeded down the page.

He looked up and was startled to find the neurosurgeon still staring at him. It was unnerving; the man's pupils were slightly dilated and his mouth worked back and forth. His thought patterns were strange and somehow unpleasant.

"Let me guess," Victor said tightly. "You're looking for antennae."

"I'm sorry," Roger said, stepping back a pace. "I was staring, wasn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, you're a little hard to get used to. If you have any idea what this means . . ."

"I'd rather not get into that."

Roger flushed and Victor immediately felt ashamed. Were their situations reversed, he felt certain he would be the one staring.

"You were blocking me on the first test," Victor said easily. "Why?"

"Control." Roger's fingers were tracing a pattern up and down the columns of red circles. "I had the cards face down on the first run. I didn't know what they were myself. The second time . . . Well, you saw what happened the second time."

"Where do we go from here?" Victor shifted uneasily in his chair. He had the distinct impression that Roger was already thinking in terms of *application*.

"I wish I knew," Roger said. "I wish I knew."

Victor's head was splitting and the nervous sweat in his armpits was clammy. He concentrated on shutting out Roger's thoughts; he wanted nothing more than to go home and sleep, but first he needed some answers. "How?" Victor asked at last.

"How what?"

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"How does all this happen? What's going on inside my brain?"

Roger tugged at his lip. "If I knew that, I'd be famous."

"You already are famous."

Roger grunted and continued to tug at his lip. When he finally spoke, his tone was flat, his gaze fixed on some point at the far end of the room.

"It's been estimated that during our entire lives we only use fifteen to twenty percent of our total brain capacity," Roger said. "Nobody really knows what happens with the other eighty. For all we know, there may be a great source of power there, power that we never use. We never have need to tap that power and so it atrophies like an unused muscle. Maybe that power is there in reserve, to be used by some future generation; or maybe it's simply the difference between the ordinary man and the genius. It's just possible that in your case the energy, or whatever you want to call what's happened to you, was released as a result of the accident." Now Roger had risen to his feet and was pacing, lost in thought, his voice a beacon beckoning Victor to follow him through this thicket of ideas into which he had wandered. He fumbled for a cigarette, finally found one in a crumpled pack and lighted it. He couldn't sit down.

"We've always assumed brain damage to be disabling," Roger continued, dragging heavily on his cigarette. "The brain controls everything: coordination, thinking, reflexes. Different areas control different functions and when one area has been damaged, its function is almost always lost.

"We always assume that our present condition is the best. It never occurred to us that brain damage could be *beneficial* in any way." Roger stopped and looked at Victor. "You've shown us how wrong we were. Your injury somehow altered the function of your brain cells, releasing a power like nothing that's ever been recorded." He crushed out the cigarette. "I think evolution may have something to do with it."

"Evolution!"

"Yes!" Roger fairly shouted. "Now follow me on this: there are profound differences between the brain pans of, say, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon man. Yet they are direct descendants! True, the changes took place over thousands of years; still, at least some Neanderthals must have had the seeds of change within their genetic makeup, a cellular plan that would someday transform them into Cro-Magnon man."

"I'm not a superman," Victor

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said cautiously. "I'm all of the things everyone else is; no more and no less."

"That's not true," Roger said, his excitement undiminished. "You were gifted—apart from other men—even before the accident. Now you're telepathic." He paused for emphasis. "The Cro-Magnons' forebears were not obviously different from their fellows; they lived, ate, drank, fornicated, and died just like the others. The differences were too small to be seen, at least in their own lifetime. It must be the same with us; to generations of men a thousand years from now, *we* will seem like Neanderthals. And some of us—you, for instance—are their genetic forebears. If I'm right, a freak accident triggered a mechanism inside your brain that most men will not know for dozens of generations!"

"But how does it happen?" Victor lighted a cigarette, his moves slow and deliberate, his voice completely noncommittal.

"All *thinking* involves a release of energy. Electrical impulses are triggered by certain chemical reactions within the cells that we don't yet fully understand; it's precisely those impulses that we measure in an EEG."

Roger sat down suddenly and began drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "In your case, the cells have been altered to a degree where the nerve endings not only pick up your own impulses but other people's as well. We've always suspected that there was a certain amount of electrical radiation or *leak* from the brain, just as there is from any power source. Besides, there are quite a few recorded instances of telepathic communication—but never anything like this. It's just *fantastic*, Victor! I wonder if you realize just how unique you are?"

Victor was gently probing now, looking for the meaning behind the words, trying to determine just what Roger planned to do with his newly acquired knowledge. He gave up when he realized that the neurosurgeon was effectively, if unconsciously, blocking him.

"All right," Victor said, concentrating his attention on a water stain just over Roger's shoulder. "How do we stop it?"

Roger blinked rapidly as if just startled by a loud noise or awakened from a deep sleep. "Stop it?"

"That's what I said, stop it! Do you think I want to *stay* like this?" Aware that he was almost yelling, Victor dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands and took a deep breath. "I'm an architect," he continued more calmly. "I used to build things and that was all I ever asked out of life; it's all I

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ask now. If you had any idea . . . but you don't. There must be something you can do, an operation of some sort; I want it."

"That's impossible at this point," Roger replied, passing his hand over his eyes. His voice was now slurred with weariness. "To attempt any kind of operation now is out of the question; I wouldn't even know what I was supposed to be operating *on*. Besides, another operation now would probably kill you."

"There may not be *time*," Victor said, tapping his clenched fist gently but insistently on the table. "I tell you it's getting worse; each day I know more about people I've never met, strangers I pass on the street. And my head hurts. For God's sake, Roger, sometimes I wake up in the morning and I don't—"

"Have you considered the *implications* of this thing?" Roger seemed unaware of the fact that he had interrupted Victor. "You can read men's minds, know their innermost feelings! There are all sorts of—"

"I've thought about the implications and I don't like any of them."

"Police work; imagine, Victor! You would know beyond any doubt who was guilty and who was innocent . . ."

"Some sort of mental gestapo?"

". . . International relations, psychiatry . . ."

"Forget it, Doctor," Victor murmured, half-rising. His voice was deadly soft. "If you won't help me, I'll find somebody else who will."

"I didn't say I wouldn't help you," Roger said, sobered by the intensity of Victor's tone. "I said I didn't think I *could* help you; at least, not yet, not until I know more. We'll have to conduct tests and *those* will be mostly guesswork. Even if I do operate, there's no way of knowing for sure whether it will do any good. That is, if it doesn't kill you."

"I'll take that chance. You can administer any test you want. The only thing I ask is that you do it quickly and that you keep this completely confidential."

"I'm afraid it's already too late for that, Mr. Rafferty."

Victor leaped to his feet, knocking over the chair. He turned in the direction of the voice and was startled to see a well-dressed woman standing behind him at an open door which he had assumed was a closet; now he could see the adjoining room beyond the door. The woman had been there all the time. She had seen and heard everything, and now Victor knew what Roger had been trying to hide.

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Visual and mental images came at him in a rush: young and attractive but cold; high self-esteem, exaggerated sense of self-importance; fiercely competitive, slightly paranoid, habitually condescending. She concealed her nervousness well.

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"Tell me, Mr. Rafferty," the woman continued, "don't you think the scientific community—your country—has a *right* to know about you?"

Victor turned slowly to Roger. "Who is she?" he asked very deliberately.

Roger's face was crimson. "Victor—Mr. Rafferty—I'd like you to meet Dr. Lewellyn, one of my colleagues."

"What the hell is she doing here?"

"Roger, I . . . I asked Dr. Lewellyn to observe. I value her opinion. I thought perhaps—"

"You had no right." Victor turned to face Dr. Lewellyn. "The answer to your question is *no*," he said tightly. "Neither you nor anyone else has any right to my life or my personal problems."

"Mr. Rafferty, I don't think you understand—"

"I mean it, Roger," Victor said, cutting her off, turning his back on her once again. "I expect this case to be handled with the utmost confidence. And I hold you responsible for this woman!" He hesitated, wondering why he suddenly felt so afraid. "If any word of this gets out, I'll deny the whole thing," Victor continued softly. "I'll make both of you look very foolish. Roger, I'll call you tomorrow. You can experiment with me all you want, but my condition *must* be kept secret. Is that clear?" He did not wait for an answer. Glancing once at Dr. Lewellyn, he walked quickly from the room.

"You've made a fantastic discovery, Doctor," the woman said.

"Yes," Roger agreed, but there was no trace of his former enthusiasm.

"But he's terribly naive, don't you think? He must realize that we have certain obligations."

"I suppose so," the doctor said, crumpling the cards in his hands and studying their motions as they drifted lazily to the floor.

Pat Rafferty glanced up as her husband came through the door. She watched him for a moment, and her eyes clouded. "Victor," she said gently, "you smell like a brewery."

"I should," he said evenly. "I just drank a quart of Scotch." He went quickly into the bathroom and splashed water over his face and neck. When he came back into the livingroom he was startled to find her standing in the same spot staring at him, her pale blue eyes rimmed with tears of hurt and confusion. Six years of marriage to the slight, blonde-haired woman had not dulled his love for her; if anything, the years had magnified his desire and need. It had been three

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days since the tests in Roger's laboratory and still he had not told Pat. It would have been hard enough, at the beginning, to tell her he feared for his sanity. Confirmation of his ability had only compounded his problem. *How,* he thought, *does a man tell his wife she's married to a monster?* "I'm not drunk," he said, turning away from her eyes. "I'm not even sure if it's possible for me to get drunk anymore."

Pat continued to stare, dumbfounded at the words of this man who had, seemingly by intent, become a stranger to her. There was something in his eyes and voice that terrified her, robbed her of speech.

"You see," Victor continued, "I've made a remarkable discovery. If I drink enough, I can't hear other people thinking. I'm left *alone.* I . . ." Victor stopped, aware that his need had spoken the words his intellect would not. He turned away to hide his own tears of anguish. He did not flinch when he felt Pat's soft, cool fingers caressing the back of his neck. "I need your help," he murmured, turning and burying his face in his wife's hair.

Victor talked for hours, pausing only once when night fell and Pat rose to turn on the kitchen lights. He told her everything: the pain, his fear, the experiments in Roger's office. When he had finished he drew himself up very straight and stared into her eyes. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't *know,* Victor. You've been acting so strangely for the past few months. I want to believe you, but . . ."

"The alcohol's worn off. Would you like me to demonstrate what I'm talking about?"

"I . . ."

"Think of a number. Go ahead; do as I say."

Victor held Pat's gaze and waited, probing, hunting for the numbers that he knew must eventually merge with the doubt and confusion he felt in her mind. When they came, he called them off with machine-gun rapidity, in a voice that never wavered. One by one he exposed every thought, every fleeting impression. He did not stop even when he felt the doubt replaced by panic. He could not escape the conviction that something terrible was about to happen. He needed Pat. Therefore, she must be convinced beyond any doubt that—

"Stop!" Pat's hands were over her eyes in a vain attempt to stem the tide of thick, heavy tears that streamed in great rivulets down her cheeks. "Stop it, Victor! Stop it! *Stop it!*"

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Pat leaped from her chair and ran into the livingroom. Victor waited a few minutes and then followed. She was huddled on a far end of the sofa. He reached out to touch her but immediately stepped back as he felt her flesh quiver beneath his touch. In that moment he had felt what she felt and the knowledge seared him. He stepped farther into the darkness to hide his own tears. "I'm not a freak," he said quietly, and he turned away and headed back into the kitchen in an attempt to escape the sound of Pat's sobbing.

Her voice stopped him. "Forgive me, darling."

Victor stood silently, unwilling to trust his voice. He watched his wife sit up and brush away the tears from her face.

"I'm so ashamed," Pat continued in a voice that was steady. "I don't know what to say to you. All that time you were hurting so much . . . I *love* you so much, so very much . . ."

He went to her, folded her into his arms. They stayed that way for several minutes, each enjoying the renewed warmth and security in the touch of the other's body.

"You're afraid," Pat said at last.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Victor told her about Dr. Lewellyn.

"I still don't understand why you're afraid."

"They'll try to use me."

Pat pulled away just far enough to look up into Victor's eyes. "There's so much you could contribute, darling. Imagine what you could do in psychiatry, helping to diagnose patients. Think how much more scientists could learn from you about the human mind."

"They won't use me for those things," Victor said, surprised at the conviction in his voice. He had found the elusive source of his fear. "They'll use me for a weapon. They always do."

Pat was silent for long moments, her head buried once again in his neck. "We'll move away," she said at last.

"They'll follow."

"We'll change our names, start all over again."

"We'll see," Victor said, but he sensed that it was already too late.

Later, Victor lay back in the darkness and listened to Pat's troubled dreams. The orange-yellow glow of dawn trickled through the blinds of the bedroom window. He had not slept. If Roger was right, if his mind was, indeed, a window on Man's future, what right *did* he have to keep that portal shuttered?

Pat was beginning to stir and Victor recognized the sharpening

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thought patterns that he had learned to identify as the bridge between sleep and consciousness. He slipped on his robe and went to the kitchen to make coffee. Pat joined him a few minutes later, kissed Victor lightly on the cheek and began preparing breakfast.

They ate in silence. Victor had poured a second cup of coffee and lighted a cigarette when the doorbell rang. He rose and kissed Pat full on the mouth, holding her close to him. He sensed, even before he had opened the door and looked into the man's mind, that the waiting was over.

He was a small man. His short arms and thin, frail body were in direct contrast to the strength Victor found in his mind. His face was pale and pockmarked, punctuated with a large nose that sloped at an angle as if it had been broken once and never properly set. He wore a thick topcoat and even now, in the gathering warmth of the morning, drew it around him and shivered as if he were cold.

"I'm Mr. Lippitt," the man said to Victor. "I think you know why I'm here."

"Come in," Victor said, surprised at the steadiness of his own voice. The man entered but politely refused Victor's invitation to sit. Victor glanced over his shoulder at Pat and waited until she had returned to the kitchen. "What do you want, Mr. Lippitt?"

The man suddenly thrust his hands into his pockets in a quick motion which served to break his wall of concentration. The dark eyes in the pale face riveted on Victor, measuring his reaction as he allowed his thoughts and knowledge to rush forth.

He's too strong, Victor thought; *too strong.* But he didn't react.

"If my information is correct," Mr. Lippitt said slowly, "you know what I'm thinking right now."

Victor returned the other man's gaze. He sensed pain, chronic discomfort that Mr. Lippitt went to great lengths to conceal. "Are you sure you have the right house?" For the briefest moment there was a flicker of amusement in Mr. Lippitt's eyes and Victor found that, in spite of himself, he liked the man.

"The people I represent believe you have a rather remarkable talent, Mr. Rafferty. Obviously, I'm not referring to your abilities as an architect. We know all about your interviews with Dr. Burns. We'd like to test and interview you ourselves. We would pay well for the privilege."

"No," Victor said evenly. "I don't wish to be tested or inter-

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viewed by anyone. Not anyone."

Mr. Lippitt's gaze was cold and steady. He hunched his shoulders deeper into his coat. "You understand that we could force you. We don't want that. Surely, you can see the necessity—"

"Well, I *can't* see the necessity!" Victor exploded. "What do you want from me?"

Lippitt's face registered genuine surprise. He drew his hand out from his pocket and gestured toward his head. "Don't you see?"

"I know who you work for," Victor said impatiently. "I can tell that you're not quite sure what to do with me and that I'm considered some kind of potential threat. The rest is very vague. Your training was very thorough; you're subconsciously blocking all sorts of information that you don't think I should have."

"You scored perfectly on a telepathic indicator test," Lippitt said, eyeing Victor curiously. "You can read thoughts like the rest of us read newspapers."

"It's not quite that simple."

"But it could be! I've heard the tapes of your conversations with Burns! You can control—" Mr. Lippitt paused and again Victor sensed his physical discomfort. When Lippitt spoke again his voice was softer and his breath whistled in his lungs. "We live in an age of technological terror. Both sides spend millions of dollars gathering information to assure themselves that they're not going to come out second best in any nuclear war."

"I'm not a spy, and I don't have the training or inclination to become one."

"Your mind makes conventional methods of espionage obsolete," Mr. Lippitt said, his eyes blazing. "Don't you see, Mr. Rafferty? You could gather more information in one hour spent at an embassy cocktail party than a team of experts could gather in a year! One drink with a foreign ambassador or general and you'd have the most valuable diplomatic and military information! There'd be no way for them to stop you. You'd know who was lying, what military moves were being considered, information that other men must risk their lives to get! In a way, you'd be the ultimate weapon. We would always be assured of having the most up-to-date and reliable—"

"Have I done anything wrong? Committed any crime?"

"No," Mr. Lippitt said, taken aback.

"Do you have the authority to arrest me?"

"No."

"Then my answer is still *no*," Victor said firmly. "I have a right

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as a citizen of this nation to be left alone."

"Have you considered your *duty* to this nation?"

"How would you know I was always telling the truth?"

"Ah, well . . . I don't have an answer for that; not now. I suppose, eventually, we would have to consider that."

"I don't want to work for you. I *won't* work for you."

Mr. Lippitt lighted a cigarette. Victor handed him an ash tray. Their eyes held steady.

"It's not that simple, Mr. Rafferty," Lippitt said. "It's just not that simple. No matter what you decided, you'd still need our protection."

"Protection?" The idea was there in Lippitt's mind but it was hazy and undefined.

"Our informant—"

"Dr. Lewellyn?"

"Dr. Lewellyn was more fervent than discreet," Mr. Lippitt said in a matter-of-fact tone that failed to conceal his embarrassment. "The channels she used to inform us of your existence were not, as we say, *secure*."

"You mean that in the spy business nothing stays a secret for very long."

"Not always," Mr. Lippitt said evenly, ignoring the other man's sarcasm. "But in this case we must assume that there's a possibility other powers may already know about you. If so, well, I think they'd go to great lengths to prevent you from working for us."

"They'd kill me?"

"Without a second thought. Unless, of course, they felt they could force you to work for them."

Victor was conscious of his wife moving about in the kitchen. "You'd have to eliminate every trace of my existence," he said. "Otherwise, I'd be useless to you. And what are you going to do with Pat? Maybe she wouldn't care to undergo plastic surgery. Certainly, I'd have to."

"We'd handle everything. Would you rather risk having her see you killed? Or they might torture her if they thought it would do them any good. You know, their methods can be quite effective. You might have a more difficult time explaining to them that you simply choose not to use your skills for a dirty business like spying."

Victor's head hurt from the prolonged contact with Lippitt. His entire body ached and throbbed with exhaustion. "What if I decide to take my chances?" He no longer made any effort to mask his anxiety.

"I'm afraid that would put *us* in a difficult position," Mr. Lippitt

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said slowly, for the first time looking away from Victor. "You see, if you weren't working for us, we'd have no way of being certain you weren't working for *them*. They wouldn't hesitate to kill your wife or anybody else if it would force you over to their side." Lippitt's eyes hardened. "Or they simply might offer you a million dollars. Sometimes it's as easy as that."

Victor flushed. "Either way, then *you'd* have to stop me."

"Yes."

"Then I'm trapped."

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Rafferty. I'm sorry that it has to be this way."

Victor rubbed his sweating palms against his shirt. He was seized with a sudden, almost overwhelming desire to strike out, to smash his fist into the white face that looked as if it would tear like paper. He clenched his fists, but his arms dropped back to his sides in a gesture of resignation. Lippitt was right; on a planet covered with nations strangling on their own words of deceit and treachery, he was the ultimate weapon. He could determine truth, and he sensed that absolute truth and certainty would be a most dangerous possession in the hands of the wrong men. Had Hitler known the frailties of the men he fought, he would have ruled the world. On the other hand, a telepath could have prevented Pearl Harbor.

"Can I have some time to think about it?"

"What is there to think about?"

"Dignity. Allow me the dignity of believing I still have some freedom of choice."

Mr. Lippitt looked at Victor strangely for a moment before drawing a card from his pocket and handing it to him. "You can reach me at this number, any time of the day or night. Call me when you've . . . reached your decision." He paused at the door, turned and looked at Victor in the same odd manner. "I meant what I said, Mr. Rafferty. I am sorry that it has to be this way."

"So am I," said Victor.

The door clicked shut behind Victor with a terrible certainty, muffling Pat's sobs, punctuating a decision Victor knew could not be reversed. There was no turning back once he had begun running. Never again could he be trusted, but he would be free.

Somewhere in the United States there had to be a place where he and Pat could lose their identities and start over, perhaps a small town in the south or the west. Victor knew he must find that place and find it quickly. Then he would send for Pat. Perhaps it

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was, as he suspected, a futile gesture, but it was something he had to attempt, the only alternative to imprisonment in a world of uniforms, security checks and identity cards. He knew, too, that he must conserve his strength; already his arm ached from the weight of his single suitcase.

He knew there was something wrong the moment he stepped down from the porch. Victor felt the man's presence even before he spoke.

"Please stop right there, Mr. Rafferty."

Victor froze; he knew there was no sense in trying to run. Even without the suitcase, which he needed because it contained his bank book and credit cards, he realized that his physical condition would never enable him to outrun the guard. He turned and stared into a pair of cold, gray eyes. The man was short and stocky, very well dressed, with close-cropped blond hair. Victor felt the man's mind coiled like a steel spring.

"Who the hell are you?" Victor snapped, his frustration forming meaningless words. He already knew the answer: Lippitt's man.

"I'm sorry, sir. I must ask you to come with me."

"Your boss told me I'd have time to think things over."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have my instructions. I was told to bring you with me if it looked like you were trying to leave. Will you follow me, please?"

Victor shifted his weight back on one foot and then lurched forward, sending the suitcase swinging in an arc toward the man's head. The guard stepped easily aside, allowing the weight of the suitcase to carry Victor around until he was off balance. He moved with the grace of a dancer, stepping behind Victor, knocking the suitcase to the ground and twisting Victor's arm up behind his back gently but firmly, so that the responsibility for any pain would be Victor's if he attempted to struggle.

Victor acted instinctively, throwing back his head and closing his eyes in fierce concentration. He probed, ignoring the blinding pain, searching for some fear or anxiety in the guard's mind that he could touch and *grab hold of* with his own. There was something there, dark and shapeless, rough and rattling with death. Victor strained, probing harder and deeper, obsessed with the need to escape.

Now the guard was making strange, guttural sounds deep in his throat. Victor felt steel-hard fingers at his neck, pressing, searching for the nerve centers at

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the base of his skull. He was inside the guard's mind and there was pain there that he was causing; still the man would not let go. Victor probed still deeper, wrenching the sensations, magnifying the pain.

Then the fingers were no longer around his neck. Victor turned in time to see the man sink to the ground. The guard was moaning softly, writhing on the ground and gripping his head in his hands. The moaning stopped. The guard twitched and then lay still.

Victor knelt down beside the guard and was immediately aware of yet another presence. He threw himself to one side and missed the full force of a blow delivered by a second, larger man who must have been positioned at the rear of the house. The second man tripped over the first and sprawled on the flagstone walk.

This time it was Victor who attacked, swinging around and stepping close to the second guard who was just springing to his feet. There was already pain in the other man as a result of his fall, fear and uncertainty at the sight of his prostrate partner. Victor seized on both thoughts and concentrated, thrusting deep. The man slumped to the sidewalk without a sound.

Victor reached for his suitcase and looked up into the face of Pat, who had run out onto the porch at the sounds of the struggle. Her eyes wide with fear, the woman had jammed her knuckles into her mouth so that only her mind screamed in terror and ripped at Victor's consciousness. Victor threw aside the suitcase, turned and ran, away from the fallen men, away from the horror in his wife's mind.

Roger Burns was certain he'd turned off the lights in his office and laboratory. Even if he'd forgotten, the cleaning woman would have remembered. He'd had no way of knowing that sleeplessness and excitement over the Rafferty file would bring him back here to his office in the middle of the night. Now, someone had broken into the building. There was no other explanation for the shaft of light that leaked out from beneath his office door into the darkness.

Roger's hand rested on the doorknob. He knew he should call the police, yet the only phone was the one on the other side of the door. He could not wake up a neighbor at three o'clock in the morning, the nearest pay booth was three blocks away, and he did not want the intruder to escape. He was outraged at the thought of someone rifling through his highly

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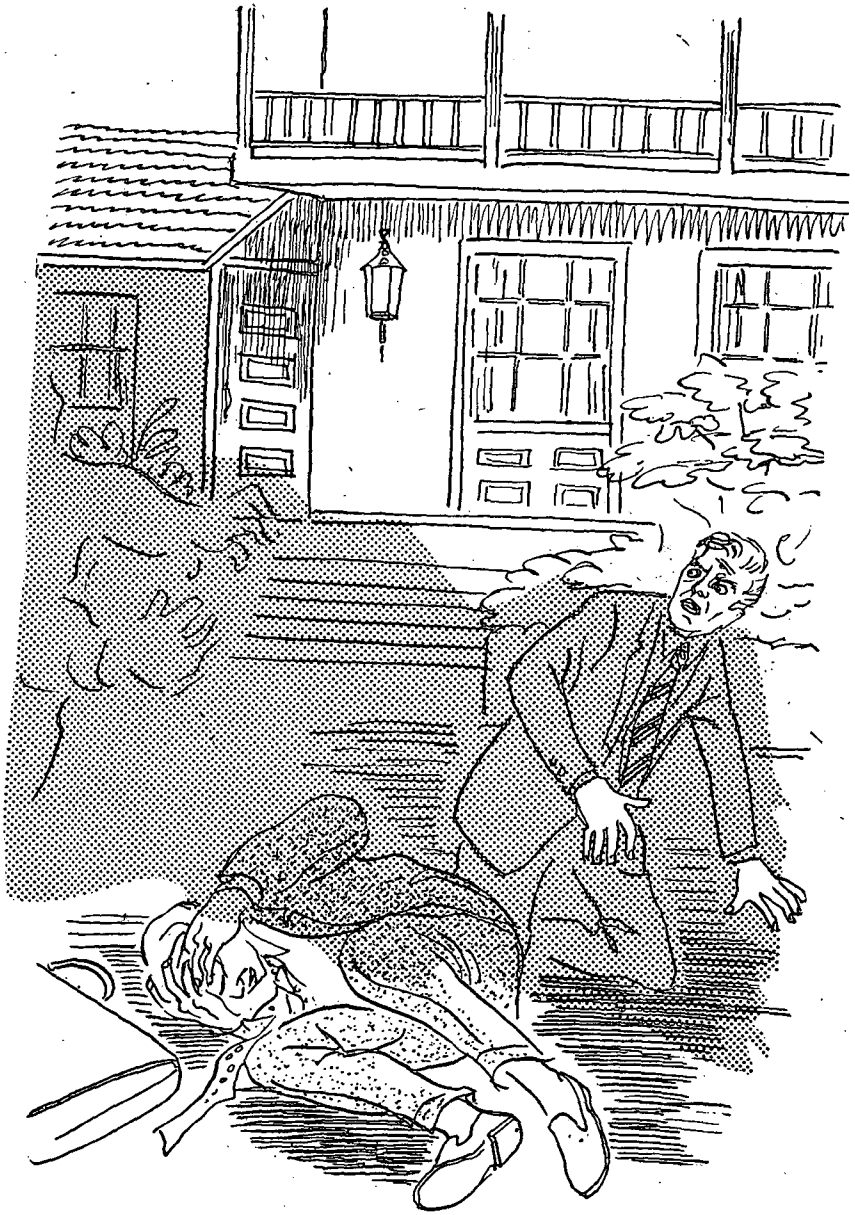

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confidential files, if that was it.

Anger triumphed over reason. Roger burst into the room and then stopped short, frozen into immobility by the sudden realization that the two men in the office were no ordinary burglars and that he had stumbled into a situation he was totally incapable of handling.

The light came from the fluoroscope. One man, an individual Roger had seen a few times at Washington cocktail parties, was taking photographs of Victor Rafferty's X rays. The other had been microfilming files that Roger knew must also be Victor's. This man now had a revolver in his hand. The long, thick silencer made it seem ridiculously out of proportion, like a toy rifle.

Roger raised one arm and the gun kicked. There was a soft, chugging sound and a small, round, white hole opened in Roger's forehead, then quickly filled with blood.

Victor sat in a booth at the rear of the coffee shop, toying nervously with a cup of muddy-brown coffee and staring at the front page of the newspaper he had spread out before him. He felt numb, dazed with guilt; the stories seemed to leap from the page, stabbing at his senses with twin fingers of accusation. *So,* Victor thought, *I am responsible for the deaths of two men.*

He was sure Roger had been murdered because of him; the guard, a man who had merely been doing his job, he had killed himself.

Some enterprising reporter had outwitted the dozen policemen outside his home with a telephoto lens. The picture showed the dead man on the walk. The second guard was just rising to his feet. Mr. Lippitt was standing off to one side, obviously unaware that the photograph was being taken. The picture had been captioned with a single, large question mark.

The waiter, an elderly man with dirty fingernails and a soiled apron, kept glancing in his direction. Victor wearily signaled for another cup. The waiter came to the table and wiped his hands on his shirt.

"Coffee," Victor said, not looking up.

The waiter pointed to the unfinished cup on the table. "You don't look so good, pal," he said. "Maybe you oughta get some food in your stomach."

"I'm all right," Victor said, aware that he sounded defensive. "You can get me some bacon and eggs. And orange juice."

The waiter swiped at the table with a damp rag and then shuffled

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off, mumbling to himself. Victor reached out for the sugar bowl and began rolling it back and forth between his hands. With the suitcase gone, he had little money and no place to go. In any case, Mr. Lippitt would have all the airports and bus terminals watched. It was too late to do anything and so it didn't bother him that he was too tired to think clearly; there was nothing left to think about. He wondered if they'd shoot him on sight.

He could still feel the *texture* of the guards' minds as he had entered them to twist and hurt; he could see their bodies lying on the ground. Most of all, he remembered the expression of sheer horror on Pat's face.

Victor stopped spinning the sugar bowl. He had been staring at it and it had suddenly come to him that he was seeing the object in an entirely different way, with more than his vision. He *saw* the glass he was touching with his hands; at the same time he could *feel* the mirror image of the bowl somewhere in his brain, elusive, ephemeral, and yet seemingly real enough to be grasped.

Victor slowly took his hands away from the bowl and touched the image in his mind.

The pain was greater than any he had ever known. Victor immediately released the image and gripped the edges of the table in an effort not to lose consciousness. The pain passed in a few moments, gradually ebbing away. He opened his eyes but did not have enough time to evaluate what had happened. The waiter, approaching his table with a tray of food, tripped over a loose linoleum tile. The tray and its contents came hurtling through the air. Victor reacted instinctively in an effort to protect his only set of clothes; he reached out and pushed at the tray with his mind. At that instant Victor felt his body bathed in searing fire. The walls and ceiling tilted at an odd angle and the floor rushed up to smash into his face.

The waiter stared, dumbfounded. His startled gaze shifted rapidly back and forth between the unconscious man on the floor and the egg stains on his apron. Something was wrong, he thought, something besides the man on the floor; there was something out of place. The old man's slow mind struggled with the problem of the flying tray and food as he hurried to call the police and an ambulance.

Now only the memory of the pain remained, like the lingering, fuzzy morning taste of too many cigarettes. Victor's mind and senses

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were clear at last, cleansed of their blinding crust of panic by the shock of coma. The sour, antiseptic smell in his nostrils told him he was in a hospital; the dull throb in his skull told him he was not alone. Victor kept his eyes closed and lay very still.

He recalled the incident in the coffee shop very clearly and he knew what had happened. He had seen the word in the textbooks: *telekinesis*, the theoretical ability to move objects by the intense focusing of thought energy. Except that telekinesis was no longer theoretical; he could do it. No matter that the crippling pain made it highly improbable that he could ever use it effectively; the very fact that he had exhibited the power made him that much more desirable, or dangerous, in the eyes of Mr. Lippitt and whoever had killed Roger Burns. Perhaps they had already decided that the risks of using him were too great. He had run. He had killed a man. He was a criminal. They could easily shut him away in some prison for the rest of his life to make sure, if he didn't work for them, he wouldn't work for anyone else.

In the meantime, Pat was in terrible danger. Whoever had killed Roger would be after her next; Mr. Lippitt had said as much. They would torture her, kill her, if they thought it could lead them to him. Victor was sure Mr. Lippitt had assigned men to guard her but that couldn't last forever. No, Victor reflected, he was endangering Pat by the very fact that he was alive.

The guard testified to the fact that he was caught. Probably the police or the hospital had called his home, and Mr. Lippitt would certainly have the phone tapped. Victor was surprised the thin man in the overcoat wasn't already at his bedside.

His was a prison with no doors and windows, a killing trap that was sucking his wife in to die with him, a problem with no solution—except one; only one. It was, as yet, only the embryo of an idea. First, he must escape the hospital.

"I'm feeling very well now," Victor said loudly, sitting up quickly and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Maybe you can tell me where my clothes are."

The policeman sat up as if stabbed with a pin. Startled, he fumbled for his gun and finally managed to point it in Victor's direction, but the asking of the question had been enough to implant the answer in the policeman's mind. Victor probed gently; the policeman was very tired; and his clothes were in the white closet at the far end of the room.

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"You might as well just lay back there, mister," the policeman said, releasing the safety on his pistol as an afterthought. "I'm not even supposed to let you go to the head without keepin' an eye on you."

Victor crossed his legs on the bed. His lungs ached from the tension but he managed to feign innocence. "Well, do you mind telling me why?" He must put the policeman off guard and there wasn't much time.

The policeman eyed Victor suspiciously. "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

Victor began to probe deeper and then stopped, sickened by the memory of the man he had killed outside his home. In that moment he knew he would not kill another innocent man, even if it meant his own death. Then, how?

". . . damned silly."

"What's that?" The policeman hesitated, and Victor probed, gently magnifying the frustration he found in the other man's mind. He smiled disarmingly. "I didn't hear what you said."

"I didn't say . . . Oh, hell, this whole thing is silly. Some little guy claims you turned a plate of eggs around in the air without touchin' them. 'Fore ya know it, I'm pullin' this extra baby-sittin' duty."

"That does sound pretty silly." *Then he knows for certain*, Victor thought; *Mr. Lippitt knows I am telekinetic.*

"Mind you, I was just on my way out the *door* when I pull this duty. As if that wasn't enough, I'm catchin' a few winks and this creep comes in and belts me in the mouth! He *hits* me, mind you! Weird little guy in an overcoat. Must be eighty degrees in here and this guy's wearin' an overcoat! I'd have killed any other guy did that and this creep's a *little* guy. But his eyes; I never seen eyes like that. Crazy, if ya know what I mean. Man, ya don't mess with a guy that's got eyes like that." The policeman sneezed and Victor sat very still. "Anyway, this guy says he'll have my job *and* my pension if I fall asleep again. Just like that! No, sir! Ya don't mess with a guy like that. And get this, he takes the key and locks me *in* here! He's gotta be some kind of big shot or he wouldn't dare do somethin' like that. Says he's gotta go someplace and he'll be right back." The man rubbed his nose and lips with an oversize, red handkerchief, then blew hard into it and repeated the process. "I think he's some kind of spy," the policeman continued, studying Victor through narrowed eyelids. "I think maybe you're a spy too. Spies are always makin' up screwy stories. Call 'em *cover*

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stories. See it all the time in the movies."

Victor choked back the strained, hollow laughter in his throat. "Did he say where he was going?"

The hand with the gun had relaxed. Now it tightened again and the barrel leveled on Victor's stomach. "You ask too many questions," the policeman snapped. "I ain't even supposed to talk to you. Maybe you're a *Russky* spy. Yeah, for all I know you're some kind of commie."

"It's all a mistake," Victor said very quietly, eyeing the gun. "I asked where the man went because I'm anxious for him to get back. I'm sure everything will be straightened out when he gets here. It's just too bad you had to get dragged into it, particularly when you didn't sleep much last night."

"Hey, how'd you know I didn't get much sack time?"

"Your eyes look tired. You were probably out playing poker with some of the fellas."

"Sonuvagun, you know you're right? Dropped twenty bucks and my wife's gonna be screamin' at me for a week!"

Victor began to concentrate on a single strand of thought. "You must be very tired," he said, accenting each word, caressing the other man's weariness. "You should sleep." The policeman yawned and stretched, and Victor glanced toward the door. Mr. Lippitt could enter the room at any time; he'd have other men with him. "It's all a mistake. You're free to go to sleep, to rest."

"I . . . can't do that." The man was fighting to keep his head up. The gun had fallen on the floor and he looked at it with a dazed expression.

"It's all right. You can sleep. Go to sleep."

The policeman looked at Victor with a mixture of bewilderment and fear and then slumped in his chair. Victor quickly eased him onto the floor before going to the cabinet and taking out his clothes. He dressed quickly and stepped close to the locked door. He bent down and looked at the lock, breathing a sigh of relief; it was a relatively simple, interlocking bolt type with which he was quite familiar.

Victor knew he must not think of his fear or the pain which was to come, but only of the consequences of failure. He sat on the floor and closed his eyes. He rested his head against the door, summoning up in his mind an image of the moving parts of the lock, each spring, each separate component. He knew he must duplicate his feat in the coffee shop; he

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must control the image in his mind so as to move the tiny metal bars in the door. Pat's life, and probably his own, depended on it.

The pain came in great, sweeping, hot waves, as it had in the coffee shop, and Victor recognized the wet, dark patches behind his eyes as the face of death. He could feel his fingernails breaking and bleeding as he pushed them into the wood, defying the agony. The lock *must* turn. His blood surged through his body, bloating the veins and arteries in his face and neck to the point where Victor knew, in a few seconds at most, they must burst.

The lock clicked.

Physically exhausted, Victor slumped to the floor. He sucked greedily at the cool draughts of air wafting in beneath the door as he waited for the fire in his head to cool. At last he rose and opened the door far enough to look out into the corridor. Empty; Mr. Lippitt had thought the locked door would be enough.

The policeman was beginning to stir. Victor hurriedly found the man's wallet and took out the money he needed. Then, summoning up his last reserves of strength, he stepped out into the hallway and headed for the emergency exit.

Pat Rafferty opened her eyes and stared into the darkness. She did not have to look at the luminous dial on the alarm clock to know it was the middle of the night; and there was someone in the room with her.

"Victor?" She said it like a prayer.

"Yes," came the whispered reply. "Don't be frightened and don't turn on the light. I want to make love to you."

Pat felt a shiver run through her body. The voice was Victor's but it was different somehow, flat and sad. Resigned. His hand was on her body.

"Victor, I can't—"

"Don't think that, darling. Please love me. I need you now."

She felt her desire mount as Victor pressed his mouth against hers; his closeness and the need of her own body swept away her fears and she reached out to pull him down alongside her. In a few minutes they lay, spent and exhausted, in each other's arms; but Victor rose almost immediately and began dressing.

"Victor, please come and lie down again."

"I can't, darling. There isn't much time. I have to go."

Pat rubbed her eyes. Everything seemed so unreal. "How did you get in? There are men all around the house."

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"I have my own built-in radar system," Victor said. "I can tell where they are." He moved closer to the bed so that Pat could just make out his shape in the darkness. She raised her arms but Victor moved back out of her reach. "I had to take the chance," he continued. "I had to see you to tell you I've always loved you. You see, I have to do something . . . terrible. There's no way to make you understand. I had to see you this one last time to say good-bye."

"Good-bye? Victor, I don't understand. Why . . .?" She was suddenly aware of a numb, *thick* sensation in her forehead. Her ears were buzzing. "Victor," Pat murmured, "I feel so strange . . ."

"I know, darling," Victor said. His voice was halting as if he were choking on tears. "I know. Good-bye."

He stood in the darkness for a long moment, staring at the still figure on the bed. Once he started to walk toward her and then stopped. Finally he turned and went back the way he had come.

Mr. Lippitt sat at his desk in the specially heated office. His feet were propped up on his desk and he held a steaming glass of tea in his hand. His frail body was enclosed in a thick, bulky sweater buttoned to the mid-point of his chest. He sipped at his tea and stared off into space. He regretted the fact that the order had gone out to kill Victor Rafferty.

But what else could one do with such a man save kill him? Lippitt thought. *He can read thoughts, move objects and he can kill, all without lifting a finger. The military potential of such a man is too great ever to risk its possible use by a foreign power. Unlike the atom, there is only one Victor Rafferty, and whoever commands his allegiance possesses a terrible weapon, a deadly skill that was silent and could be used over and over again undetected, with virtually no risk to its user. I had always prided myself as a good judge of character,* Lippitt thought. *I would have sworn to Rafferty's decency and patriotism. Then why had he run?*

Mr. Lippitt was interrupted in his thoughts by the buzz of the intercom. "Yes?"

"There's a message on an outside line, sir. I've already scrambled the circuit. Should I put him through?"

Mr. Lippitt's feet came down hard on the floor, jarring the desk and its contents, spilling the tea over a stack of multicolored, cross-indexed documents Lippitt had spent the day ignoring. He waited until he was sure he had regained

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control of himself and then picked up the receiver. "All right," Mr. Lippitt said, "cut him in."

There was a soft, whirring sound in the line, an automatic signaling device signifying that the scrambling device had been activated. "Lippitt here."

"He's in New York City," said the voice on the other end of the line. "He has a research lab in the Mason Foundry. He's hiding there. What are your instructions?"

Mr. Lippitt bent over and picked up the overturned glass. "What's your code name?"

"Vector Three," came the easy reply.

"Of course," Mr. Lippitt said, fingering the glass. "And I suppose that's where you are? The Mason Foundry?"

"Of course."

"All right, now you listen carefully," Lippitt said, opening a drawer and removing a small, snub-nosed revolver. He opened a box of shells and carefully loaded each chamber as he spoke. "I'll be in New York in an hour. Mason Foundry. You'll wait for me, of course."

"Of course."

Mr. Lippitt hung up and shoved the revolver beneath his sweater, inside his waistband along the hard ridge of his spine. He jabbed at the intercom.

"Yes, sir?" came the quick reply.

"I want a jet to New York, *now*," Mr. Lippitt barked at the startled secretary. "Arrange for helicopter and limousine connections. All top priority."

Mr. Lippitt was not surprised to find no agent waiting for him outside the building; neither was he surprised to find Victor Rafferty waiting for him inside.

"Come in," Victor said, leveling a pistol at Mr. Lippitt's forehead and motioning him to a chair across the book-lined executive office. "You look as if you expected me."

Mr. Lippitt shrugged. "You picked the wrong man's brain. Vector Three left for France two days ago."

"Then why did you come?"

"May I have a cigarette?" Victor threw a pack of cigarettes across the room and Mr. Lippitt purposely let them fall to the carpet. He bent over, freeing the revolver. He was certain his speed was sufficient to draw and kill Rafferty before the other man could even pull the trigger. He sat back up in the chair and lighted the cigarette. "I was curious," Mr. Lippitt said casually. "I don't think you meant to kill that man. If I did, I'd have had this place surrounded with troops. Why did you run?"

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"I don't think I could make you understand."

"That's too bad. You see, having you around is like living with an H-bomb; whether it's ticking or not, it still makes you uncomfortable."

"Now you're beginning to understand."

Mr. Lippitt glanced around the room, fascinated by the many models of buildings Victor had designed, relying on the properties of the high-tension steel alloy developed by the foundry. *Strange,* he thought, *how buildings had never interested me before.* He rose and walked across the room to examine one of the models more closely; he could feel the gun aimed at the back of his neck.

"So, what are you going to do?" Mr. Lippitt asked.

"I've already been contacted and all the arrangements have been made. I leave for Russia tonight."

"That means you'll have to kill me."

"Yes."

Mr. Lippitt turned to face Victor. "Why? I mean, why defect?" He no longer made any effort to hide the emotion in his voice. "I wouldn't have thought you were a traitor."

Anger flickered in Victor's eyes, then quickly faded. "You forced me to do what I'm doing," Victor said. "An H-bomb! That's what you compared me to, right? To you and your people—"

"They're your people, too."

"All right, *people!* To people, I'm nothing more than a weapon! Did it ever occur to you I might want to lead my own life?"

"We've already been over that. Without us, you and your wife would either be killed or kidnapped. We wouldn't want you to be killed; we couldn't allow you to be kidnapped."

"Exactly. So it boils down to this: since my life is no longer my own anyway, the only thing I can do is choose the side which can best provide protection for Pat and myself. That means a communist country. By definition, a police state can provide more protection than a non-police state. Since I wouldn't be *free* in either country, I have to pick the country where I would be *safe*. Their very lack of freedom guarantees my life and Pat's."

"Very logical."

"Oh, there's money, too. I won't deny that. As long as I have to live out my life in virtual captivity, I may as well be comfortable. I've been assured of . . . many things. You don't operate that way, do you?"

Mr. Lippitt ground out his cigarette and immediately lighted an-

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other. He regretted not killing Rafferty when he had the chance. "No, we don't. Unfortunately, our budget forces us to rely on patriotism."

Victor said nothing. Mr. Lippitt watched the other man rise and walk toward him. He tensed, waiting for exactly the right moment to drop to the floor and grab for his gun. He knew it would be very difficult now, for Rafferty was close and the element of surprise was gone. Yet, he knew he must not fail; he was the only remaining barrier between Rafferty and the Russians.

"Out the door," Victor said, prodding Mr. Lippitt with the gun. "Left and up the stairs. Walk slowly."

"Don't be melodramatic. Why not just shoot me here?"

"I want to show you something. If you prefer, I'll shoot you now."

There was something strange in the other man's voice, Mr. Lippitt noted, an element that he could not identify. In any event, he realized he would stand little chance if he made his move now. He walked ahead and through the door. The barrel of Rafferty's pistol was pressed against his spine, no more than an inch above the stock of Lippitt's revolver.

The stairway led to a long, narrow corridor. Mr. Lippitt walked slowly, the echo of his footsteps out of phase with those of the man behind him. He said, "It's quiet. Where is everybody?"

"There's no shift on Saturday," Victor said tightly. "There's only the watchman. I put him to sleep."

"You can do that?"

"You know I can."

"Just making conversation." Mr. Lippitt hesitated. "There is such a thing as *lesser evil* in the world, Rafferty. We need you on our side. Think about it."

"I'm sorry," Victor said. He reached out and grabbed Mr. Lippitt's shoulder. "In there."

Mr. Lippitt pushed through the door on his left marked *Restricted*. He found himself on a very narrow catwalk overlooking a row of smelting furnaces. The cover hatches of the furnaces were open and Mr. Lippitt looked down into a liquid, metal sea that moved with a life of its own, its silver-brown crust buckling and bursting, belching huge bubbles of hot, acrid gas. The air was thick, heavy with its burden of heat.

"You wanted to show me where you were going to dump my body," Mr. Lippitt said.

"Yes."

Mr. Lippitt watched Victor's eyes. He could not understand why the other man had not been able to probe his thoughts and dis-

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cover the existence of the gun. Perhaps he had not felt the need; the reports had mentioned the pain linked with the act. *In any case,* Mr. Lippitt thought, *Rafferty will be dead the moment he blinks or looks away for even a fraction of a second.* "You're going to do very well in your chosen profession," Mr. Lippitt said, steeling himself for the move he knew he would have only one chance to make. "People tend to trust you, give you the benefit of the doubt. You have a very disarming air about you."

"That's not all I wanted to show you," Victor said.

Lippitt's muscles tensed but his hand remained perfectly still. When he did go for the gun it would be in one fluid, incredibly explosive motion.

"I want to show you what might have been if things were different," Victor said.

Mr. Lippitt said nothing. It seemed to him that Rafferty was relaxing, letting down his guard. Also, he judged that the angle of the gun would allow him to get off at least one shot, even if he were hit, and one shot was all he needed. Still, he waited.

"You're cold," Victor said suddenly. "You can't even feel the heat from those furnaces."

"What?"

"I said, you're cold. You're always cold. You've been cold for the past twenty years. That's why your mind is so strong. You can't block out the memories so you control and discipline yourself to the point where they no longer make any difference, but still you can't feel any warmth."

"Don't," Mr. Lippitt said, his voice scarcely a whisper.

"You can't forget the Nazis and their ice baths. They put you in the water and they left you there for hours. You shook so much you thought your bones would break. You remember how they laughed at you when you cried; you remember how they laughed at you when you begged them to kill you."

"You stay out of my mind! Stop it!" Mr. Lippitt's voice was quivering with rage.

"It takes enormous courage to keep going in the face of memories like that," Victor continued easily. "All those coats, all those overheated rooms; none of it does any good. We're alike, you and I. Both of us suffer agony others can't begin to understand. That's why you broke all the rules and came here alone, even when you knew I'd be waiting for you; you were reluctant to see them kill me."

"You devil," Mr. Lippitt said through tightly clenched teeth.

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"You play with people, don't you?"

"There's nothing wrong with your body, you know. That healed long ago. The Nazis are gone. You don't have to be cold anymore."

There was something soothing and hypnotic about Rafferty's voice. Mr. Lippitt struggled to clear his mind as he fought against the pervading warmth spreading through his body, fought it and yet embraced it as a father his dead child returned to life.

"It's a trick," the thin man said, startled to find his eyes brimming with tears.

"No," Victor said quietly, insistently. "I'm not putting the warmth in your body; it was always there. I'm simply helping you to feel it. Forget the water. All that happened a long time ago. You can be warm. Let yourself be warm."

"No!"

"Yes! Let me into your mind, Lippitt. Trust me. Let me convince you."

Mr. Lippitt closed his eyes, surrendering to the strange, golden warmth lighting the dark, frozen recesses of his soul. He thought of all the years he had spent in the prison of his memory, immersed in the water that was sucking away his life . . .

"You don't feel cold anymore."

"No," Mr. Lippitt whispered. Now the tears were flowing freely down his cheeks. "I don't feel cold anymore."

"Why don't you test it? Take off your coat."

Mr. Lippitt slowly removed his heavy overcoat. Now the revolver was within easy reach. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm grateful to you, but no man should have that kind of power."

"Not unless he can use it wisely," Victor replied, raising the hand with the gun. The hammer clicked back with the soft, assured sound of finely-tooled metal. "The demonstration is over."

Mr. Lippitt dropped to his knees and rolled over on his side, clawing for the gun in his waistband. Years of experience and training had transformed him into a precision killing instrument, the movements of which must be measured in milliseconds. Still, inside Mr. Lippitt's mind, it was all slow motion, as in a nightmare; he drifted through the air and bounced on the concrete, the gun appearing miraculously in his hand and aimed at Victor Rafferty's heart, but there was something pulling at the gun, an invisible force that he could feel writhing like a snake in the metal. Steel bands had wrapped about his head and were squeezing, crushing his brain. He pulled the trigger twice, then peered through a mist of pain

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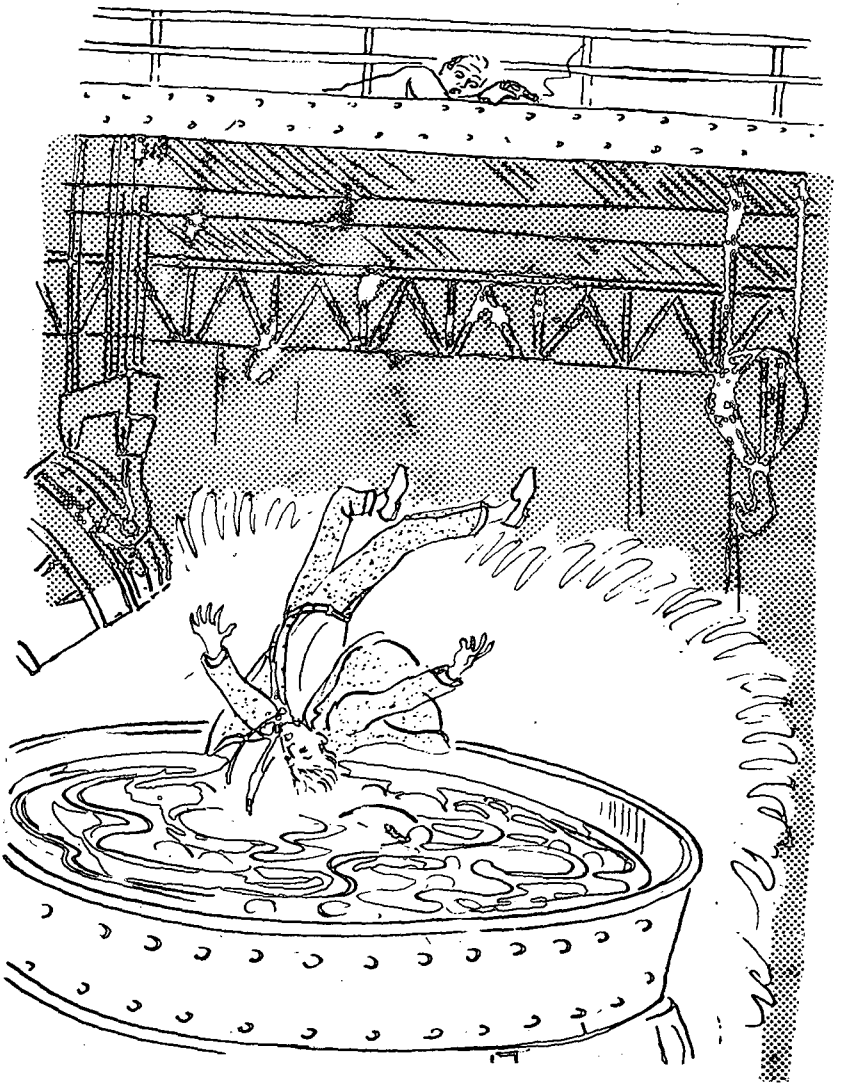

as Victor Rafferty threw out his arms and toppled over the guard rail, his body arching grotesquely as the pull of gravity snapped his legs over after his body and he fell through space to land with a muffled, crackling splash in the soft inferno below. It was the last

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thing Mr. Lippitt saw before sinking down into a black void laced with the smell of gunsmoke.

The barrel of the revolver was still warm, leading Mr. Lippitt to conclude that he couldn't have been unconscious more than a few minutes. He lurched to his feet and, supporting himself on the guard rail, stared down into the pit where Victor had fallen; the slag continued to belch and bubble. There was no trace of the other man, not even the smell of burnt flesh. So, he reflected, he had killed the man who had cured him. No matter that there was no choice; for the rest of his life, even as he savored the warmth of the sun on his body, he would remember this day and welcome his own approaching death; he had simply traded one nightmare for another.

He paused at the foot of the stairs and, after a moment's hesitation, entered one of the offices. He picked up a telephone and dialed one of the outside lines to the agency.

"Good afternoon," came the cheery voice, "this is—"

"This is Mr. Lippitt. The fox is dead."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. When the woman spoke again, her voice was punctuated by heavy breathing.

"Sir, this is an outside line. If you'll wait for just a moment—"

"This is an emergency," Lippitt said slowly. "Fox is dead. Fox is *dead*."

He hung up before the frightened woman had time to reply. He reasoned that the others would be suspicious at first, at least until they'd had time to check their sources for the code words. Besides, he'd make sure that certain information was leaked. That, he decided, should keep them away from the woman. He lighted a cigarette, then picked up the phone again to call the Rafferty home.

I'm here to see Mr. Thaag.

The Civilized and the Savage. He'd been a guest of the General Assembly the day Sentor Thaag had made that speech. He'd never met the man. That should make things easier.

Some men would kill for a tattered tribal banner. Their imagination sets with the sun, their world ends at the horizon. Others travel the planet, whisper many tongues, and find only the face of their brother.

The Civilized and the Savage. How does one tell the difference? He could tell the difference.

May I have your name, sir?

Nagel. John Nagel.

Or any other name. It didn't

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make any difference. His real name had died with his old identity. It was all there in the two-column obituary in the *Times*. Everything in his past had died back in the foundry with the image he had planted in Mr. Lippitt's mind. Eventually, he would need a new appearance, a new manner and personality. For now, John Nagel would have to get along with tinted contact lenses, false beard and an exaggerated limp.

He'd miss Pat; he'd ache for her. But his "death" had been her only guarantee of life.

I'm sorry, sir, but your name is not on the appointment list. Are you expected?

He would lean close, make contact with her mind. She must be convinced of his *importance*. The secretary would disappear for a few minutes, then reappear, smiling.

The Secretary General will see you now.

He was not sure what would happen next; he would have to wait until he could get close to Thaag and explore his mind. Even then, he was not sure what he would be looking for; perhaps, simply, a man he could trust.

Victor Rafferty went over his plan once more in his mind. Satisfied, he began walking slowly across the United Nations Plaza toward the massive glass and stone obelisk rising up from New York's East River. He stopped and looked up into the bright, sun-splashed day; a breeze was blowing and the multitude of flags strained against their stanchions, painting a line across the sky.

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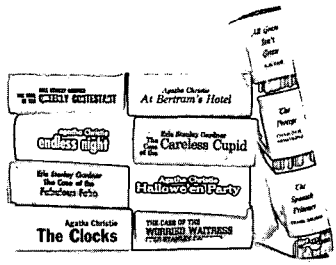

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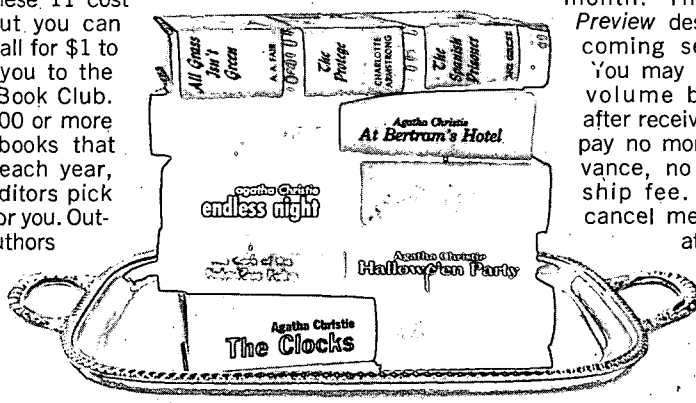

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